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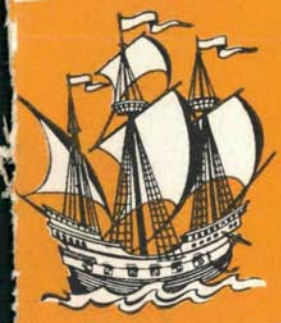

THE SHORT STORY MAGAZINE

OSBERT SITWELL

AGATHA CHRISTIE

MICHAEL GILBERT

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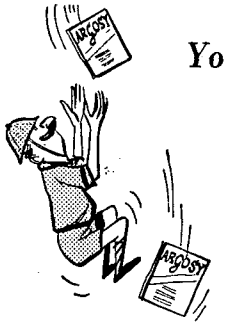

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I JUMPED into the first railway compartment which seemed empty: my eyes fell on a book left on the seat opposite by a previous passenger.

I took it up absent-mindedly and ran through the first lines. Five minutes later I was reading it as eagerly as a clue to a hidden treasure. I learned that everyone's memory is capable of fantastic feats; that an ordinary person if he has taught himself to control the way in which his brain stores impressions can memorize accurately long and complicated lists of facts after reading them over only once or twice. I thought I would test the truth of the statement.

I took a timetable out of my suitcase and began reading quietly in the manner prescribed, the names of about one hundred railway stations. I observed that, after reading them over a few times, I could recite the whole list off with hardly a mistake. With a little more practice I found I had committed them so completely to memory that I could remember them in the reverse order and even pick out one station from the list and say which number it was, and what were the names of the towns before and after it.

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F. ROBERT

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ARGOSY

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WATCH HIM AT WORK:

Osbert Sitwell

THE contrast is profound, and startling. Outside, in late sunshine, children bounce and perambulate home from school, the gay and duffel-coated denizens of Chelsea straggle over the pavements, pneumatic drills shatter the surface of the King's Road.

Inside the house in the square, only two steps away from all this tumult, is silence, glittering severity and splendour where, disposed in orderly profusion, dwells an assemblage of rare, beautiful objects from all ages and all quarters of the world. A Tiepolo, melting and diaphanous, hangs above a tiny portrait painted in collaboration by Whistler and Sickert, with Sickert's apology for the outsize ears and his excuse, "I was only twenty-three at the time," quoted on the back. Elsewhere a large complicated Polynesian totem with sharklike features is adjacent to a small macabre painting of the three Sitwells in America and facing an exquisite glass goblet engraved with a picture of Renishaw, the family house in Yorkshire.

To give each of the treasures in the house the attention it deserves would take weeks; while the sorting-out of the rich and rococo contents of the owner's mind is a process that has occupied him for some thirty years and is still unfinished. "If I look back," Sir Osbert said, "to the time before I began writing, and consider what I have created since then, I feel amazed."

In appearance, Sir Osbert resembles an amiable and patrician lion, with mane slightly dishevelled. He moves lovingly amongst his works of art, his substantial outline thrown in high relief against a background of prismatic colour.

He talked about his autobiography. This tour de force in five volumes, collectively bearing the title of the first, *Left Hand, Right Hand!* was conceived by the author in 1919, and he then

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waited for twenty years to pass by before beginning the delightful and rewarding task of putting them down on paper. Some parts of his memoirs are still safely stowed away for another hundred years until " their indiscretions become historical."

In the meantime, the available books form a unique record, something between a game pie and the Bayeux Tapestry, depicting the first part of the twentieth century by means of reminiscences, acute portraiture, and a number of extraordinarily funny anecdotes—such as the downfall of Tetrazzini when presented with a wreath of bay by the young writers of England—all embodied in superb descriptive prose.

His method of work is essentially straightforward. When the period of internal creation and growth is over—and this, as he says in his autobiography, should occupy a nobly-proportioned edifice of days and hours—the plan for the book is thoroughly sketched out and, once this is made, he never departs from it. This, he believes, is extremely important. A story loses some of its life as soon as it diverges from the original conception.

While he is engaged on a book he likes to seclude himself from the world as much as possible. He wrote *Before the Bombardment*, his first novel (of which a reviewer remarked that it deserved to be boycotted if only because of its un-English attitude towards the horse) in an Italian hotel which had originally been a monastery, at the top of a flight of two thousand steps, where no casual visitor was likely to intrude. " They've installed a lift there now," he remarked sadly.

Escape with Me was written in a disused kitchen in Antigua, *Winters of Content* near Syracuse; one of his favourite stories, *Death of a God*, was begun and completed during the enforced seclusion of a journey to Brighton when the train on which he was travelling stuck in the snow.

" Writing puts you in a state of great elation, which can easily be overthrown." Warmth and light, particularly light, he finds essential to his work. The gloom of the English winter climate, especially its fog, has a detrimental effect, and he prefers to go south in the winter months to work under a more brilliant sky.

He finds he can create best with a pen in his hand. Oddly enough, he learnt to write at the relatively late age of seven (his sister, Edith, was writing at three) and for many years wrote with slowness and difficulty. " My bad handwriting was the cause of one of my most valuable habits—that of drafting and redrafting each page at least seven or eight times." He writes because he loves it. " Virginia Woolf once told me that I ought to know what audience I was aiming at, but I write to please myself."

" Were you shocked at her remark? " we asked.

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" No. But I didn't agree." He added thoughtfully, " It was a particularly odd thing for her, of all people, to say."

His latest work is a collection of fairy stories, *Fee Fi Fo Fum!* A village called Whittington, near Renishaw, claims to be the birthplace of the celebrated Dick—in defiance of his more commonly accepted Gloucestershire origin—and a local variant of the Whittington legend first started Sir Osbert rewriting nursery lore.

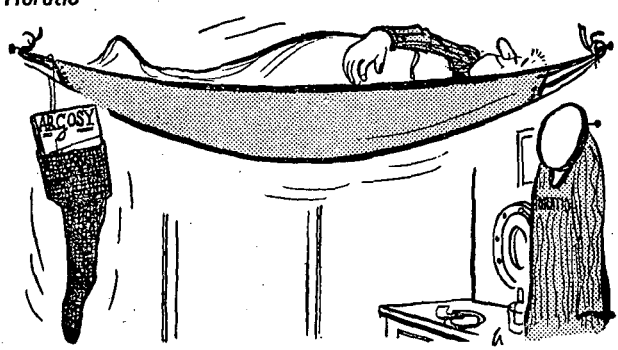
As he says, fairy stories allow plenty of opportunity for oblique comment, and he has always had a fondness for this form of fiction since childhood days when they were a forbidden luxury, being under the ban of his father, Sir George Sitwell (whose portrait is so extensively, lovingly, ruthlessly drawn in the biographical books.) Nonetheless, Davis, the Sitwell children's nurse, used to read Hans Andersen aloud and the stories were immensely popular. Sir Osbert likes to observe a strict code of folk-lore ethics when writing fairy tales, always working from an existing framework, but imparting his own flavour. " Such stories," he says, " should resemble those liqueur bottles one used to see with straws inside them on which a crystallised deposit was slowly forming."

In his hands the legends acquire an especially heady bouquet. When we asked if he considered his wickedly satirical fairy tales suitable for the young, he suggested that Ronald Searle's young ladies would enjoy them.

Inventing titles is a favourite minor pastime for Sir Osbert—with him a title sometimes precedes a book—and one in which he excels. Perhaps his most nostalgic bull's-eye is *Laughter in the Next Room*, inspired by his father's melancholy remark, and it is, of course, not surprising to learn that the next room was that in which the witty Osbert was entertaining an overflow of guests.

JOHN SILVER

Horatio



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SPUR OF THE MOMENT

He had produced his own threepence and fallen in love

BY JOAN AIKEN

"THE radio is out of order," said Mr. Newbery, putting his head round the kitchen door. "Would you mind singing?"

It was his peculiarity that he could only work if accompanied by music. Julia obligingly broke into "The First Nowell" as she sprinkled Neap over the breakfast dishes.

Her father lingered a moment or two, straightening the sprigs of holly in the dish-rack, in order to give genius time to kindle. "You ought to let each dish drain for one and three-quarter minutes before drying it," he said reprehendingly.

Julia raised her eyebrows and, without ceasing to sing, reached down a tea-towel printed "Be a Deer and Dry Up." Mr. Newbery took the hint and escaped rapidly back to his study.

Just as Julia finished the dishes there was a thunderous banging on the front door, which burst open. A loud voice shouted, "Hullo, 'ullo, 'ullo. Happy Christmas eve! Anybody at home?"

"Oh lord," Mr. Newbery muttered distractedly. "It's that young man of yours. Can't you get rid of him?"

But he heard his treacherous daughter exclaiming in accents of rather overdone surprise and delight, "Why, Hugh! Fancy seeing you so soon after breakfast! You couldn't have come at a better moment; my bike's got a puncture, and Father was just saying the radio's gone wrong."

Hugh came boiling in like the south-west wind, grinning from ear to ear. He had a set of teeth worthy of Red Riding Hood's grandmother, but the disposition behind the teeth was, Mr. Newbery privately considered, regrettable: like a houseleek. Hugh had taken hold of the Newberys and put down roots, and was using up more and more space that might have been better employed.

"What do you see in that oaf?" Mr. Newbery often lamented to Julia, and she said blandly, "But he's so useful!"

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In a twinkling now Hugh had the puncture mended and the radio put to rights, but Mr. Newbery doubted if these benefits were worth the lectures on Care of tyres and Getting the most out of your battery that they were then obliged to sit through.

Julia made coffee.

"Not strong enough, Juley," Hugh said. "You ought to put one heaped measure for every cup. Ought to get an Espresso machine really, Dad, you know."

"I'm not your Dad yet," said Mr. Newbery with restraint.

"Well, well. Won't be long now, as the monkey said when the mower cut his tail off. Come for a run over to Brinsley, Juley? I'm demonstrating efficiency methods there today."

"No, thank you, Hugh," said Julia. "I must clean out the pantry. And there's the turkey to stuff."

"Should come, you know; do you good. Brighten those wits a bit. She's been a bit dull lately, hasn't she, Dad?"

But Mr. Newbery said he must get back to his work; if Julia wanted to spring-clean the pantry on Christmas eve it was her affair. When Hugh had gone, though, he reappeared and said, "Julia, you must shed that incubus. He is slowly sapping what remains of my mind. I can't work any more; I sit in a paralysis of fright waiting for a bang on the door and those shouts of 'Hullo, Dad!' He is too hearty for this degenerate family, Julia; either he goes or you go. But before you go I want some help with my new programme."

"Programme?" said Julia, whose method of spring-cleaning the pantry appeared to consist of sitting on the kitchen table and reading a literary weekly. "But I thought *Town Hat* was the success of all television successes?"

"So it is, so it is," said her father testily. "But we must not rest on our laurels. The trouble is that I'm getting bored with it. I'm utterly stuck for ideas. I need stimulating company. What's the use of a daughter who attracts suitors like flies when all they can do is mend punctures? Put away that snobbish high-brow paper, take this twenty pounds, which is probably our last, go to Rampadges, buy any ten or more articles, and bring them home."

"May I buy clothes?" said Julia, looking suddenly alert.

"No clothes."

"Oh."

"You must buy at random. And be back in time for tea; I want to try to get something sketched out before that repulsive young man turns up again. I'm hoping that your selection of purchases will put some ideas into my head."

Julia bolted upstairs, and returned almost immediately in town

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clothes and a silly but enchanting hat like a lemon with white frills. Mr. Newbery looked at her gloomily.

"Don't pick anybody up," he admonished her. "Ten *inanimate* objects."

"Do I ever?" She flashed him an innocent, speedwell-blue glance and ran from the house.

Richard Stoke usually walked to his office, the firm of Stoke and Pringle, Architects and Surveyors, in which he was slowly qualifying to step into the shoes of Stoke Senior. This morning he was late. He jumped on a bus.

"Upstairs," said the conductor, giving him a martyred look.

It is not easy to achieve complete control of a sextant and a four-foot spirit-level while leading a large and lively Alsatian puppy, but Richard was adept after much practice. Raoul, the puppy, went on ahead while Richard encouraged him from behind with the level.

The conductor, after the manner of his kind, came darting upstairs in pursuit so as to cause Richard the maximum inconvenience by asking for his fare before he had his impedimenta stowed. Luckily there was a diversion: the girl across the aisle had dropped a threepenny piece. Burdened as she was with two large pineapples and, moreover, apparently suffering from hiccups, she was having some difficulty in recovering it.

"I'm so sorry," she apologised sweetly to the conductor, "I always get hiccups if I have to travel on the top deck."

By the time the vanquished conductor had found her coin for her, Richard had produced his own threepence and had fallen in love. When the girl got out at Rampadges, Richard urged Raoul to his feet and followed her like a hypnotic subject.

She darted first to the stationery and book counter, where she bought three sermon pads, reduced to one-and-eleven, and a manual called, *How to Build Your Own Cathedral in* 100 *Man-Hours*. Next she acquired a musical box, and then moved to the electrical department where she lingered over a display of sun-lamps.

A knot of last-minute Christmas shoppers surged by. When they had passed, Richard was disconcerted to see that as well as the sunlamp she was purchasing a deaf aid. Was this enchanting creature deaf?

But sidling closer—as well as he could for Raoul, the sextant, and the spirit-level—he heard her say to the assistant, "Oh, no, it's for my father, the bishop. He gets worried, you know, when he can't hear the cathedral bells, so he's been insisting on ringing the tenor bell himself, and of course that's bad for his tired heart."

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The look of grave, daughterly concern on her face was bewitching, Richard thought, as he followed her to the sports department, where he was startled to overhear her buying a pogo stick—"For my father, so that he can nip across the Close when he's late for Matins. He's getting rather old and stiff, and this will be a great help,"—and an inflatable, rubber paddling pool. "We are going to fill it with Epsom Salts," she explained solemnly to the woman who sold it to her, "then Daddy needn't go to Tunbridge Wells every April." She also bought two pairs of snow-shoes, observing that you never knew when they would come in handy.

As she had by now acquired a largish heap of parcels, she left them all in the travel goods department while she bought a duffel bag to put them in.

Next she made for the Food Hall, whither Richard pursued her—and a kindly assistant gave Raoul a free sample of Puppi-krisp. The way led through the Pet Department; in passing the girl was seduced by a parrot offered at the bargain price of five pounds.

"It's because he bites, miss," the man told her. "I wouldn't advise you to have him, he can be downright nasty if he takes a dislike to anyone."

"Oh, but that's just what we need at home," the girl explained. "Since the minor canons started their skiffle group they've given Father no peace: always asking him to join. A bad-tempered parrot in the porch might keep them away."

However, to discourage it from being bad-tempered on the journey home, she paused at the wine counter and bought a miniature bottle of Drambuie which, administered to the parrot on the spot, soon had it in an amiable and contemplative frame of mind. She also bought a quart of cider and, at the next counter, a large cooked chicken.

Richard wondered if the cider was for the bishop or to maintain the parrot's good humour. He was more and more amazed at the charm and capability of this girl. Imagine being able to keep a shopping list of such length and complexity in one's head! And she had entirely tamed the parrot. It was clambering happily up and down the pogo stick, which she carried like a spear, muttering, "Help, fire! Help, fire!"

She paused now, and carefully counted the change in her purse, hesitated, and finally stopped in the boating department.

"How much is that rope?" she asked, pointing to a coil.

"Elevenpence a fathom, miss."

"I can only afford five fathoms. Would that be enough to hang myself?"

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" Oh yes, ample," the young assistant began, and then stopped dead, yardstick in hand, and gasped, " But, *madam*—"

" Yes," the girl said seriously and sadly, " there's such endless trouble between my father and my boy-friend that I've decided there's only one way to end it all." And she stood with lips folded together, staring straight in front of her like Boadicea, while the shaken young man cut off a length of rope and coiled it, and Richard, equally shaken, wondered with what words he could dissuade this ravishing girl from her dreadful project.

One thing was certain. He must not take his eyes from her. At all costs he must follow her home, in case her father, the bishop, was out conducting Evensong or ringing the tenor bell when she got back. She must not be left on her own for a moment.

He edged after her through the parcel-laden crowds.

Two hours, and several nightmarish bus-rides later, Richard was still gamely in pursuit. They were in the wilds of Surrey, it had begun to snow—" Those snow-shoes *will* come in handy," Richard thought parenthetically—and both Raoul and Richard's stomach were protesting that lunch was long overdue, and there seemed little reason to believe that tea would not be likewise. The conductor, two old ladies, Richard, Raoul, the parrot, and the girl were the only passengers remaining. The bus was toiling up a steep and tree-girt incline.

The old ladies rang the bell and the bus came to a slithering stop.

When, after they had alighted, the driver tried to start again, there was a frenzied noise of racing engine but no movement.

" He's done it again," the conductor said resignedly. " I told him not to stop on this hill when there's snow, but he always forgets. Would you mind getting out and helping me push, ladies and gents, please? The luggage can stay inside."

This Julia interpreted to mean the parrot, the pogo stick, and her duffel bag, while Richard left his sextant and spirit-level, now registering an acute variation from the horizontal. They walked to the back of the bus and looked at it without enthusiasm, as it tilted over them like some cornice in the frosty Caucasus. Snowflakes pouring down thick as butterflies silted on Julia's frivolous hat and made Raoul sneeze.

" When I wave my hand, push," called the driver.

" Raoul, come here," said Richard.

" Why do you call him Raoul? " asked Julia, getting ready to push.

The driver waved his hand and they struggled and shoved like coal-heavers.

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"After the Vicomte de Bragelonne," panted Richard. "He was the son of Athos, you remember. He was jilted by Louise de la Vallière."

"And has Raoul been jilted?" gasped Julia, much interested. The bus was beginning to move.

"Not that I—puff—know of, but the name sounds like the noise—" they were both running now, and the bus was grinding along—"that he makes when I leave him behind." And indeed Raoul raised his voice in a long, lamentable howl and came loping after them. "He can't bear being left." Keep her mind occupied, he thought, that's the way. "You see I used to work for a firm of cookery-book publishers, making up cocktail recipes. I had to drink forty to eighty cocktails a day. Quite against my will I was turning into a dipsomaniac."

Raoul caught them up, and the bus, with a terrific roar of acceleration, spurted away over the crest of the hill and left them.

"I do hope the driver will remember we're not on board," said Julia. "But how do the cocktails tie up with Raoul?"

"I'm coming to that. My Aunt Adelaide was worried about me, and when she died she left me Raoul with instructions that I was to take him everywhere. She knew that meant I'd have to change my job and get something in the open air. Thanks to her I'm now completely cured."

"So you could get rid of Raoul now?"

"She said I was never to part with him unless I could find him a home in a bishop's family."

Julia darted an acute, blindingly-blue glance at him, but he was staring innocently ahead through the snow. "Look, there's our bus waiting," he said.

The journey was resumed, but soon Richard saw that Julia was getting ready to descend. She wound the parrot's chain firmly round the pogo stick and shouldered her duffel bag. He picked up the spirit-level.

"Is this your stop, too?" asked Julia, with a certain suspicion.

"I'm taking observations and collecting statistics regarding the height and distribution of pine trees in Surrey," Richard replied promptly. "The Comet Film Corporation, a small British company, is making a film of *Lohengrin* and they want Teutonic-looking scenery for the outside shots. Of course, it's unfortunate that the pines in Surrey are nearly all p.sylvestris, but I daresay they'll be able to make do."

"Not very good weather for making a survey, surely?" said Julia. She stopped, sat in the snow under a bush, and strapped on a pair of snow-shoes. "Would you care to borrow a pair?"

"Thank you; I would like to very much. Beggars can't be

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choosers," said Richard in a melancholy tone. "If I don't somehow get some money to pay my rent, Raoul and I will be sleeping in the crypt of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields." He finished lacing his snow-shoes, stood up, and shouldered her duffel bag.

"That's very kind of you," Julia said uncertainly. They plodded on through the snow together, and presently came within sight of a small cottage.

"Isn't there a cathedral around here?" said Richard casually.

"Not nearer than Guildford. Why do you ask?"

"The spire would have been useful for taking an elevation. Never mind, I can manage without." But it was now his turn to survey her with suspicion as she unlatched the garden gate.

Meanwhile Hugh had returned from his demonstration. At four o'clock he dropped artlessly round to the Newberys'. "Any tea going, Juley?" he bawled.

No answer. He poked his head through the kitchen door, saw a kettle on the floor and, looking round the corner of the entrance, found Mr. Newbery irritably winding a well-handle. It was a peculiarity of the cottage that the well was in the scullery.

"Now, now, now, Dad," said Hugh, sliding his cigarette farther into the corner of his mouth and advancing on Mr. Newbery, who would have bolted had there been another door. "Pump's not gone wrong since I mended it, surely?"

"Bit slow in starting," mumbled Mr. Newbery, who had long since found it simpler to wind himself up a bucket of water as required than engage in the hellish pump-starting routine.

"*I'll* finish winding and then I'll start her up for you," said Hugh, chivalrously wrenching the handle away from him. He gave it a tremendous jerk, the aged rope broke, and the bucket dropped back into the well with a splashing clatter.

"*Now* look what you've done," snarled Mr. Newbery, at the end of his tether. "All I want is one cup of tea, and a chance to drink it in peace and quiet. What a hope! Not a drop of water in the house, and rugger-playing oafs in and out all day long."

"Soccer, not rugger," said Hugh, not a bit discomposed. "Y' know, Dad, you keep this pump in a shocking condition. Tank's empty, too. No wonder she won't go." He strode out and returned with a can. Mr. Newbery was feverishly looking in all the empty milk-bottles, vases, or jugs which might conceivably hold water and finding none.

"How much does she hold?" Hugh asked, after he had put in some petrol. "Got a torch?"

"Battery's run out."

"Always ought to keep a spare in the house." Casually

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Hugh lit a match and peered into the petrol tank. There was a small but brisk explosion. A tongue of flame shot out, annihilated Julia's nylons on a towel-horse, and leapt to a pile of potato-sacks.

"I told you so," said Mr. Newbery rather unfairly. He shrugged his shoulders and retired to the kitchen. Julia and Richard were just coming in. He looked at Richard balefully. "Your other young man," he said to Julia, "has set fire to the house. The well-rope's broken, the bucket's down at the bottom. It's a pity I forgot to pay the insurance."

Hugh came rushing out. "It's hopeless," he gasped. "Get out while you can!" He himself set the example. Richard wandered to the scullery door. "Have you a telephone?" he said.

"The Exchange always takes twenty minutes to answer," Julia murmured regretfully, indicating the instrument.

Richard linked the parrot's chain round the flex and took off the receiver. Then he emptied out the contents of the duffel bag and gave the bird a tot of cider. It perched obediently on the receiver and began shouting, "Help, fire! Help, fire!"

"Someone will hear that sooner or later," said Richard. "Now—" he was tying one end of the coil of rope to the mouth of the duffel bag—"if you, your Grace, will inflate that paddling pool—" he handed Mr. Newbery the pump off Julia's bicycle—"you—" he passed Julia his snow-shoes—"could wrap these in a wet tea-cloth and beat out the smouldering bits of the fire."

He swung his improvised bucket down the well, brought it up full, and tossed the contents over the blazing sacks. Before drawing a second bucketful he reached down into the well with the pogo stick, hooked up the rightful bucket, and emptied it into the paddling pool which Mr. Newbery had now inflated. "This will do as a reservoir, since two people can't draw water at the same time." He passed Mr. Newbery the bucket and drew out six more duffel bags full.

"Ingenious," said Mr. Newbery admiringly. He emptied half his bucketful on the fire, reflected a moment, poured the rest into the kettle, and put it on the range in the kitchen. Then he went back to his task. The fire was almost out by now, and after a few more bucketfuls he decided that he could make tea and leave the rest to Julia and the new young man.

"Help, fire!" shouted the parrot for the hundred and fiftieth time. It glared beadily at Raoul by the range, and launched itself at him like a dive-bomber. The telephone fell off the window-sill and dangled quacking at the end of its flex.

"It's all right, thank you, the fire's out," Mr. Newbery said politely into the receiver before replacing it.

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Raoul had taken refuge with his master, so the parrot, cheated of its prey, turned on Hugh, who had just reappeared with a stirrup-pump. "Now you'll be all right," he was shouting. The parrot pecked him.

"Oh, go and take a running jump at yourself, you and your efficiency methods," Mr. Newbery snapped.

Julia and Richard emerged, black, damp, and triumphant. "Rather busy just now, Hugh," Julia said absently. "I'm going to clean out the pantry."

"If I get psittacosis I shall sue you," Hugh said angrily. Even he could see he was not wanted.

Mr. Newbery picked up, *How to Build Your Own Cathedral.* "Here, dear boy," he said. "With the compliments of the season." And, as Hugh left, slamming the door, he added, "Let's hope that's the last we shall see of him for a hundred man-hours."

The door shot open again and two brawny and beaming firemen dashed in. "All right, Mr. Newbery," shouted one of them. "We'll soon have her out. Where's the trouble?" They quested about like bloodhounds.

"Oh, not *more* efficiency experts," sighed Mr. Newbery ungratefully.

"Sorry not to get here sooner," the larger fireman apologised when they were really convinced there was nothing to be done, and were drinking cups of tea. "Miss Mumpsey at the Exchange is that deaf it's a wonder she puts through any calls at all. Matter of fact we were down there having a bit of a warm-up—the Fire Station's so cold—and that's how we came to hear of your little blaze."

"It was most kind of you, most kind," said Mr. Newbery with distinguished courtesy. "A little token of seasonal good will—" he fished about in the clutter on the kitchen table and extracted the sunlamp—"to warm up the Fire Station, and perhaps you would call in with this present for Miss Mumpsey on your way back? I am told these appliances improve one's hearing marvellously. A happy Christmas to you!"

Beaming, the firemen withdrew.

"As for this young man who has helped us with such a genius for improvisation—" Mr. Newbery turned cordially to Richard—"we must reward him, Julia, to the best of our ability." He delved again on the kitchen table. "Would you, my dear fellow, prefer a sextant, a spirit-level, a pogo stick, or a paddling pool? The parrot, I perceive, has left us already."

"It's very kind of your Grace," Richard began, but Julia cut in.

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" What about the programme, Father—if you go giving everything away? "

" It has already taken root in my mind," Mr. Newbery said happily. He wound up the musical box and it began to play " The First Nowell " in the breathless tinkle common to such instruments. He handed it to Richard and picked up the sermon pads. " I'm going to retire and rough it out now. It will be called, *Spur of the Moment*. Two people, a heap of miscellaneous objects, a crisis—yes, yes. Get rid of your young friend, Julia, and you can type for me. I fear the buses will have stopped running, but it is only five miles to the station and the snow is not more than eight inches deep."

" I'm afraid I suffer from snow-blindness," said Richard decisively. " In that respect I take after my grandfather, who walked round and round Trafalgar Square and eventually died of exposure. There's not a hope that I should survive the walk."

" In that case you must of course stay the night," said Mr. Newbery, capitulating with grace and the respect due to a fellow-improviser. " You won't object to sleeping in the paddling-pool? Perhaps you might help me with my TV programme? "

" TV," said Richard. The last piece of the jigsaw fell into place.

" I will join you both for dinner at eight," said Mr. Newbery benevolently. He waved his sermon pads at them and withdrew. Raoul snored peacefully by the glowing grate.

" He's so comfortable here, it's a pity this isn't a bishop's family," said Julia thoughtfully. " Oh, by the way, hadn't you better ring Comet Films and tell them you're snowbound? "

" Ahem," said Richard. " As to that . . ." He grinned. Julia, standing with a pineapple under each arm, grinned back.

" Perhaps we'd both better begin at the very beginning," she suggested.

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NAUTCH AND CROSSES

Our friends, anxious, no doubt, to show us as much life as possible in an Indian out-station, invited all Jumalpore to assist at the Christmas festivities . . . It was quite a relief to one's eyes and the tympanums of one's ears when half-a-dozen " nautch " girls from a neighbouring village came in, scantily clad, *principally* in little tinsel stars with an apology for the thinnest muslin just here and there.

MRS. ALEXANDER FRASER, *In London Society*, 1891

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UNDERGROUND CAT

Tom was considered to be a ration-consumer rather than a ration

BY HAROLD MEAD

JOE first met the cat when he was in rather a hurry. That would have been a couple of days before Singapore fell to the Japanese, when the burning oil-tanks at the naval base were sending up a huge pall of greasy smoke, and the troops coming back from the north of the island were shining black with oil; their teeth and their eyeballs being the only white things about them. The heavy bombers were coming over steadily to off-load their stuff on to the city; and those light reconnaissance planes—the ones with the spats on their wheels—were buzzing round like bluebottles over carrion, machine-gunning, and chucking out hand-grenades.

Joe was trying to find Brigade Headquarters, only it wasn't quite clear that there still was one; and if there was, nobody seemed to know where it might be. But his personal problem was that he had long since marched through his only pair of socks. So when he came upon the deserted bungalow, he decided to look in. The Nips weren't very far away, but they didn't seem to have reached the immediate neighbourhood; and anyway, the socks had become quite an obsession.

It was queer, he used to say, because the place was completely untouched. Ruin and mess were the normal things by then; but there wasn't even a corpse in the garden. Indeed, the garden was full of flowers, and didn't need much weeding. The front door was open, and inside the bungalow everything was as tidy as could be: the cushions in the drawing-room plumped out, the clock on the mantelpiece telling the correct time, and cigarettes in the silver box on the table. Joe found himself wiping his boots on the doormat, and he felt he ought to apologise for intruding, only there was nobody at home.

In the dining-room, the table was laid for a meal. That started a train of thought, so he went out to the kitchen, and found the refrigerator full of food. He crammed his haversack with tins and,

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having had no food for forty-eight hours, ate some raw eggs. All the time he was feeling extremely guilty; much more worried about stealing from his unknown host than about the possible arrival of a Nip with a tommy-gun.

Upstairs, he felt even more embarrassed. The first room he tried was a bedroom, where a woman's clothes were strewn about the floor, and there was evidence of hurried packing. But in the dressing-room there were drawers full of the man's shirts and underclothes and socks.

"The trouble was," he said afterwards, "that they were all so tidy. That fellow did himself pretty well. About two dozen pairs of socks in one drawer, all neatly rolled, and sorted by colours. I hardly liked to touch them. I took two pairs—could have done with three, really. I was still civilised in those days, I suppose."

When he said that to his fellow-prisoners, they understood what he meant. You have to starve and go near naked for a while before you become really acquisitive; before you find you can't look at a thing without wondering whether you can eat it, or at any rate make use of it. But Joe contented himself with two pairs of socks, and went downstairs. He was about to leave the bungalow when the bombers came over.

There were bombers over most of the time, if it came to that, but this lot flew in lower than usual, and there was a Bofors gun somewhere that opened up on them: bang—bang—bang—bang! steady as a heart-beat, stabbing up at them with red-hot needles of tracer. Joe's reactions were pretty quick, and by then he knew very well when bricks were coming his way. He took a dive behind the drawing-room sofa. There was a big portrait in the room, nearly life-size, of some fellow with an arrogant expression on his face and a blue ribbon across his waistcoat. This drifted away from the wall and suspended itself upside down in mid air, looking damned silly, Joe thought. Then the roof fell in, and things were altogether rather confused for a while.

That was when he met the cat, only it was a kitten then. Things seemed to go on falling on top of him for several minutes, and when that was over, Joe spent a bit of time wondering whether he was dead or just mortally wounded. This was because, when he opened his eyes, he couldn't see anything, owing to the fact that a curtain had fallen over his head, followed by a number of other objects. But there was a smell of burning, and somebody was by then lobbing mortar-bombs into what was left of the bungalow; so Joe decided that, dead or alive, he'd better get out.

When he got the curtain off his head, he found himself staring

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into a pair of sapphire-blue eyes belonging to this kitten, which was three parts buried under broken plaster and other rubbish.

Joe said that he never knew whether the kitten was behind the sofa in the first place, or whether it was one of the things that came to him from above. He was rather inclined to the second view, later on. He stared at the kitten, and stopped swearing for a moment. The kitten stared at him, and then asked, "Morrow?" So Joe stretched out his hand, rather surprised to find that he could do so, and began to tickle it under the chin.

"Well," he would say, "it's the sort of thing you do without thinking, when you meet a cat. And damn me, if he didn't begin to purr. I could hear it loud and clear when the fellow with the mortar laid off for a while."

When he first saw the kitten, Joe was just about to take off, because experience told him that if the Nips were troubling to throw mortar-bombs into the ruins of the bungalow, it meant that they intended to visit the place in the near future; and right then he didn't feel equal to meeting them, his only equipment being a revolver, the socks, a pair of kippers, half a pound of bacon, and some tins he hadn't had time to look at properly. Indeed, he used to admit that for a moment or so he didn't include the kitten in his immediate arrangements.

"But," he would say, "there's something about cats. They're so damned independent that you've got to feel grateful if they notice you. When the mortaring stopped, this one climbed out of the dust and plaster, and rubbed itself against my face, without bothering to wash first. It asked, 'Morrow?' right in my ear, which I took to mean, 'Where do we go from here?'"

It was a seal-pointed Siamese, with a collar round its neck bearing a name, and an address, which Joe didn't think was relevant, just then. It was a big kitten, getting on for half grown: you might almost call it a catten. Joe buttoned it inside his shirt, and was on his way out when he noticed the refrigerator again, now upside down near what was left of the front door. There were some tins of condensed milk still inside it, which he hadn't bothered with before because he detested the stuff; but now he had to cater for two, so he added the milk to his collection, and left the premises at a rapid trot.

The milk nearly proved to be a mistake, because when Joe broke cover, some Nip was near enough to shoot at him. No doubt this frightened him quite a lot; but you may be certain that it also made him angry. He used to get very angry if he fancied that that somebody wasn't being kind to his cat.

Which, maybe, is one reason why the two of them were still

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together, nearly three and a half years later, still prisoners, and working as gangers on the strategic railway that the Nips built with slave labour from Siam to Lower Burma.

The newspapers afterwards called it The Railway of Death, and for once they didn't exaggerate; because a man (or a cat) had to be tough to survive starvation, disease, and overwork, and lucky to avoid being liquidated by the Nips, or blown up by the United States Air Force who, in their turn, were liquidating the railway.

They were both lucky, and they were both tough. Joe always was a very hard case indeed, except for things like children, and animals, and pinching other people's socks; and the catten was now a full-grown cat, known as Tom because he obviously was one: a gaunt, hard-bitten creature with no illusions about Nips, but with a great and understandable affection for Joe.

He was deadly to rats, which were apt to be reasonably plentiful in the tents at night; but even so, quite how Joe managed to supplement Tom's rations was always one of those mysteries. Because on meat-days, two pieces, each the size of a lump of sugar, would be a fair helping, and the rest was mostly rice and stewed pumpkin. You could buy an egg, now and then, or a bit of dried fish, if you had any money; and naturally Tom had his admirers, who subscribed what they could. Tom was a hungry cat; but though gaunt, he wasn't as gaunt as Joe, who would have made a name for himself as the Human Skeleton in any circus.

In the early period, when food was really short, and rats and snails and rubber-nuts were highly regarded, Joe had to half kill a big Jock, whom he found stalking his cat with a cleaver. After that, Tom was generally considered to be a ration-consumer rather than a ration. Indeed, as he continued to survive, he became quite famous up and down the railway; a kind of mascot, or symbol that things were going to be better one day, and that the Nips had it coming to them in the end.

Prisoners spent a good deal of time marching through the jungle, moving up the railway-track from one piece of work to the next. These marches were rugged going, even for those who had boots; but Tom had it the easy way, because he travelled in Joe's pack. It can't have been pleasant in there in the heat, or in the monsoon rain, when Joe was toiling along jungle paths that had become rivers of black slime; but Tom was a philosopher, and mostly he slept. When Joe turned him loose, he didn't wander off and get lost; but he had an uncanny knack of not being there when the Nips were looking for trouble.

This was, perhaps, because Lieutenant Kiriama once took a shot at him, and blew off the tip of his tail. Kiriama happened

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as usual to be drunk. But it was a queer business, as Joe pointed out, and a good many of us noticed for ourselves. For, when Tom made his mistake, and suddenly ran out from behind a clump of bamboo, Lieutenant Kiriama seemed for a moment to be thoroughly frightened. So much so that Jimmy Jameson was fool enough to laugh out loud, and got a broken jaw for it, and spent the next six days and nights standing up outside the guard-room, in rather poor shape.

There were, of course, numerous occasions when Tom might have been killed by a Nip, just for fun; but he wasn't. And the loss of the last inch of his tail seemed to be a good thing for him; because for some reason all the Nips except Kiriama seemed to think it a very good joke; that is, when the lieutenant was not present. Japanese humour is sometimes peculiar, and this jest seemed to go on and on.

So did the war, but Tom and Joe went on being tough and lucky, and everybody was glad of it, because Tom was a kind of resistance-leader, and big Joe, with his broken nose and his smile, was such a gentle giant, and had a way of making us all feel that we could go on taking it for as long as was necessary. Tom was by now much too big for his collar; but Joe kept the thing very carefully. On it was engraved the name, " Susan Blake," and the address which no longer mattered.

Joe used to say, " Of course, when this war's over, I'll have to take him back to Susan. She'll be eight or nine years old now, and she must miss him."

Then he would scratch Tom under the ear, and you could see him thinking maybe she *might* let me keep him, seeing that we've been through rather a lot together.

He'd dreamt Susan up until he knew all about her, curly hair and all. We used to laugh at him for it, but he didn't mind.

In the summer of 1945, our lot moved to a camp near a wooden bridge that was important because just there the railway crossed a deep ravine. It wasn't a big camp—about two dozen tattered tents in a clearing hacked out of bamboo-jungle—but it was a bad one. This was because Kiriama was in charge of it, and because the Nips had sited it carefully—our part of it—so that the Americans couldn't do the bridge without doing us. The United States Air Force had its job, so we knew what to expect.

The Liberators came over one evening, and fixed the bridge, and were very neat about it. The score was four Nips and only two of us, so we had to be thankful. But when we took stock, we found that there was another casualty. Tom was missing, and he stayed so.

We hardly liked to speak to Joe, because of the expression on

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his face as the hours crawled by and there was no Tom. And it wasn't only that he mourned his friend: he was thinking about Susan. By the next day he obviously had no stake in staying alive; and maybe that helped him to act as he did; though maybe not, because he was strong on matters of principle.

Kiriama was so upset by the raid that he went on a drunken jag, and beat up quite a few, and got his sword out, and beheaded a monkey that he met by the cook-house, which belonged to Corporal Bolton, who was dying of beriberi anyway. Then he ordered out a working-party to repair the bridge; and he became unreasonable, because there weren't enough men to do the job, and they weren't very fit, and there was a shortage of tools, owing to the tool-shed having stopped a fair-sized bomb. And he wanted that bridge mended in twelve hours or less.

Joe was put in charge of the working-party, an unenviable job at the best of times, and on this occasion even more so.

He made no comment when he was detailed; and thirty-six hours later, when the work still wasn't finished, and nobody had eaten, and some of the fellows were passing out, he still had said nothing, except for what was essential.

Then he opened his mouth, and stated, " We're going back to camp for a meal, whatever the Nips may think about it."

" You can't do that," we told him. " Kiriama will have you shot."

" We're going," he declared. And he ordered us to stop working, and fall in.

The guards in charge of us started shouting, and they laid about them with bamboos; but they were rather half hearted, because they knew as well as we did that the Americans were bound to return in order to make sure that the bridge stayed busted, and that they were by now somewhat overdue. So in the end they tailed along behind us, very dejected. Kiriama would quite possibly execute some of them for allowing us to stop work; but the bridge was likely to be equally dangerous, any moment now. It was evening, and that was the usual time for a raid. We were all very frightened, but Joe didn't seem to be thinking about what was going to happen to him. As we trailed back to camp through the bamboo, he kept whistling between his teeth. That was his way of calling Tom.

When we arrived back in camp, Kiriama swayed out of the nice hut that we had been made to build for him, and at first he seemed unable to believe what he saw. He'd been drinking again, and was wearing only a fundozi and a pair of wooden clogs. He was short, and very muscular, and in the evening light his skin looked yellower than usual. He stood there, scratching his

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cropped head with one fingernail, staring at us with his slit eyes.

Then he began to shout, and the guards started in on us with bamboos and rifle-butts, and they meant it. When I got the blood out of my eyes, we'd all been beaten back to the edge of the parade-ground, and there was Joe kneeling out in front of us, with his hands tied behind his back.

I noticed a number of things that didn't matter. There were the ragged tents standing out from the dark background of jungle, and there was smoke climbing up from the cook-house fire. The sky was turning peach-coloured, and against it the tall bamboos made the most delicate pattern in black. There was a wa-wa monkey making its despairing call, somewhere in the distance. It all seemed like some picture that I was looking at through a sheet of glass, and I had a queer, remote sort of feeling, as if I wasn't there. But then Kiriama came out of his hut followed by Sergeant Shimozo.

They were both in their best uniform, and Kiriama held a drawn sword. He harangued us in Japanese for a long time; and when he stood behind Joe, and raised his sword, there was one great indrawn breath from all of us, including the guards. He brought the blade down with a loud shout, but stopped the stroke about half an inch from Joe's neck, so that it was difficult at first to believe that the head was still there. He went on showing off his swordsmanship, chopping at Joe but stopping short each time; and we didn't know when the end would be.

It was so intolerable that people were groaning aloud, and I think that we would have tried to rush the guards if one of us had had the guts to lead the charge. Finally, Kiriama yelled again and lifted his sword right up, and we all thought, This is it! But the most astonishing thing happened. Joe raised his head, and whistled loudly through his teeth. Even he doesn't know why.

What made Tom overlook the Nips will never be known; but maybe it was because he was so darned pleased to spot Joe from the edge of the jungle. He streaked across the clearing, right between Kiriama's legs. Kiriama cried out, dropped his sword, and ran for his hut.

Perhaps we hadn't been listening for them as carefully as we usually did in the evenings, but we just had time to realise that Kiriama was one of those people who can't bear to have a cat anywhere near them when we heard the Liberators, and saw them knife-edged against that lovely sky, coming in low for their run up to the bridge.

We untied Joe, who grabbed Tom, and we all ran like hell for the jungle, cheering as we did so. We were quicker off the mark than the Nips, who seemed to be somewhat confused. This

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time, the boys in the Liberators weren't quite so tidy, for the camp caught a packet, and Kiriama's hut got a big one, all to itself. Nobody came after us; and not many days later the Thais told us that the war was over.

About a month after, some of us were together in a hospital ward in Rangoon, and were told that the Medical Officer was a woman. This was a thing of which we did not approve, and we thought that army standards had certainly been lowered as a result of the war.

When she came in, we saw that she was a young woman, at that. She was tall, with smooth, black hair that shone very nicely, and she had an exceedingly pretty face. But she frowned when she saw Tom, sitting on Joe's chest, washing himself.

"What is that cat doing in the ward?" she demanded.

We all disapproved of this question, because by then it was generally held that Tom had a perfect right to be anywhere he pleased, including the White House, the Kremlin, and the throne-room at Buckingham Palace. The ward Sister went rather pink, and explained that the cat was an ex-prisoner-of-war, too, and that in the circumstances she thought . . .

So this female M.O. marched over to Joe's bed, and tickled Tom under the chin, which he obviously thought was a very proper thing for her to do; and he asked her "Morrow?" which we took to mean, "How soon do we get a troopship back to England?"

Then she and Joe got talking, and Joe explained that he didn't really own Tom, and that he was proposing to take him back to his mistress, who would be about eleven years old now, and he hoped was doing well at school. He produced the collar. And when that young woman snatched Tom up in a very unprofessional way, and cried a bit (but tidily, as we had to admit) and said what her name was, we all laughed at Joe a lot, because there wasn't a single curl in Susan Blake's hair.

Susan kept Tom. He was her property, after all. She had searched for him everywhere, that desperate day when she was ordered to leave her work at the hospital in Singapore and get on a ship; and her elderly father had walked off to join the Volunteers.

But Joe didn't mind a bit, because he got Susan.

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Christmas Star, on the opposite page, by the Russian poet, Boris Pasternak, is part of a poem from his novel, Doctor Zhivago.

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Christmas Star

It was winter.
The wind blew from the steppe
And it was cold for the child
In the cave on the hillside.

He was warmed by the breath of an ox.
The farm animals
Were stabled in the cave,
And a warm haze drifted over the manger.

Shaking from their sheepskins
The wisps of straw and hay-seeds of their bedding,
Half asleep, the shepherds gazed
From a rock ledge into the midnight distance.

Near, never seen till then, more shy
Than the glimmer in the window
Of a watchman's hut,
The star shone on its way to Bethlehem.

It flamed like a hayrick,
Standing aside from the sky
And from God;
Glowed like a farm on fire.

Rose like a blazing
Stack of straw.
The sight of the new star
Startled the universe . . .

He slept in the oak manger,
Radiant as moonlight in the hollow of a tree . . .
The Magi stood in the shadow,
Whispering, scarcely finding words.

All at once, a hand stretched out of the dark,
Moved one of them aside to the left of the manger.
He looked round. Gazing at the Virgin from the doorway
Like a guest, was the Christmas Star.

BORIS PASTERNAK

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JACK AND THE BEANSTALK

by OSBERT SITWELL

WHEREAS Jack the Giant Killer—though it is true that not so long ago his story was summarily dismissed, in the current psycho-analytic cant of the day, by a writer in a weekly paper as a "simple case of Adlerian Inferiority Complex"—may by some be regarded in a different light, as a knight-errant searching for ladies to rescue; yet it appears certain that the other celebrated Jack, whose name is fabulously associated with the Beanstalk, and with whom we are first concerned, was no idealist, but the prototype of many capitalists in Europe and America during the era of unrestricted free enterprise.

His career can be seen to resemble nearly that of any man who started life as an errand-boy and ended—as was always said of such people—" entirely through his own effort " as a millionaire, a sort of magical Sir Thomas Lipton.

When he was a boy, Jack and his widowed mother lived in Hampshire, some twelve miles from Winchester. She was a typical widow, but of the French variety rather than of the English, glorying in her black, neatly and tightly clad in it, sad but voluble, with a practical outlook; while Jack for his part was equally typical of an English boy, apple-cheeked, as a rule reliable beyond his years, and given to slouching and sly remarks. A stranger would have guessed him to be a farmer's son, but his father had been a butcher, dead some three years before this story begins.

After her husband's death at forty from rheumatic fever, the widow had been obliged to sell the business to pay his debts.

Nevertheless, in later years, it was said of young Jack that in the manner of many great men (*great* was then a term reserved specifically for those who became of a sudden inordinately

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rich) he owed much to his mother's early training of him, because it had been her habit to din continually into his ears, even when he was a small child, such concise odds and ends of proverbial wisdom, as " Never miss an opportunity," " Don't kill the goose that lays the golden eggs," " Look after the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves," and most often of all, " God helps those who help themselves."

And, indeed, the last and so frequently recurring adage may really have influenced him for, as will be seen in the course of the next few pages, he helped himself to a good deal at a comparatively early age.

The only assets of mother and son, to start with, were their mutual affection, a thatched cottage, the front of which was thickly covered during the summer with honeysuckle and small red roses, a garden, a meadow, and a cow called Buttercup, which supplied the rich, golden butter and creamy milk they sold in the nearest market every morning: sold profitably, because both products looked appetising and abounded in vitamins—albeit these were then called something else.

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One day, however, the cow yielded no milk, and in consequence the widow became worried to desperation. Jack tried to find work, but the Trade Union rules forbade it because he was only eleven years of age. Moreover, they lived too far away from a town for him to be able to attend a school, and his mother had not been able to give him anything but practical lessons, for she had no letters herself.

In consequence, when not employed by her on errands of one sort or another, he spent all of his considerable spare time climbing trees, until he attained an extraordinary proficiency in this art of the youthful, and showed an altogether astonishing agility.

This way of spending the hours used, however, to irritate his mother, who frequently would leave her cottage, trace him to a tree-top, and call up to him, "Why aren't you working? Climbing like that will never get you anywhere!" (Little did she foresee the future.)

Soon, his mother was obliged to sell their furniture piece by piece, and even to get what she could for their spare clothing—though of this there was little enough.

Finally the day came when, with a solemn air, she called Jack from the garden and told him to drive Buttercup to market the next morning, and sell her for the best price he could obtain.

On the way there, he met an old man with a flowing, white beard, who looked, Jack thought, rather like a hermit. He was clad in a long, black robe, and wore on his head a high, conical, black hat decorated with golden suns and stars.

Directly the boy was near enough, the stranger spoke to him, saying, "Good morning, Jack, that's a nice cow you've got. I'd like to buy her."

"Well, what do you offer, sir?" asked Jack.

"I'm a wizard, not a merchant or farmer," replied the old man, "so I do not buy with money; but I offer you in exchange for her five beans. They're not by any means ordinary vegetables, neither broad beans nor scarlet runners; they are *magic* beans, and if when you reach home you plant them, by morning they'll have grown to the kingdom of the sky."

Jack, being still young, forgot his mother's careful instructions. The thought of these beans fascinated him, and at once, without any attempt to raise the price, he accepted the offer of the sorcerer, who then drew out from a deep pocket five small, kidney-shaped objects with a hard skin corrugated as a contour map of the world, and counted them into the boy's hand.

Jack started off for home in high spirits but, as he approached the cottage, he began to feel a little nervous about his bargain . . . The widow was waiting for him at the door.

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"Well, what have you brought me, son?" she called.

"I've brought you five magic beans, mother," he answered.

The poor woman, flabbergasted by her son's unexpected act of disobedience and folly, shouted at him, "Magic, my foot! I'll give you beans!" (which is said to be the origin of that well-known slang phrase.) She then—for by this time Jack had entered the house—seized the beans from his hand, flung them out of the window, and sent her son straight up to bed without supper.

As Jack lay in the dark room, hungry and cold, and unable for a long time to sleep, he thought of the beans, and determined never to fall into such an error again. It was then that he for the first time comprehended fully the importance of knowing the exact value of all animals and objects, and of money itself . . .

A full moon soon shone into the room, plating the walls with its precious if intangible metal, but this began before long to fall into patches, instead of sheeting a whole surface.

He wondered what the reason could be, and for a long time stared at the window, for something appeared in the past hour to be obstructing the entrance of the light, and he also vaguely wondered what could be the curious rustling that he seemed to hear, soft and rhythmic. Though he was not sleepy, he was far too tired physically to get out of bed.

If, however, he had been more inquisitive, and had persevered, he would have discovered that the sound was one that no man had ever heard before, or would probably ever hear again: the sound that trees and plants and all green things give in the process of their growing, a music usually spread over so long a period, and so slowly, that the human ear cannot catch the pattern of it. He lay there, wondering whether the soft sounds were due to his imagination, until after another half an hour or so, he fell asleep.

In the morning he woke up in his familiar room; but the moment his eyes opened, he realised there was a difference; it was strangely dark. He got out of bed and ran to the window. A beanstalk as thick as the bole of a well-grown oak, only more flimsy in substance, and with leaves as large as those of a great-leaved magnolia, filled the space, casting a green shadow on the white walls. Craning his neck out through the various barriers, he looked upwards, and saw there, too, the curious plant, stretching, apparently for ever, up to the very sky itself.

He dressed quickly and, curiosity overcoming his hunger, slipped out before, as he thought, his mother was down, and began with ease to climb the beanstalk.

He soon reached the clouds. But he had not passed beyond earshot when he heard his mother rush from the cottage and

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shout up to him, "Jack, you come down this instant! And don't you get it into your head that, after all, it's a magic bean. It's just those hormones you read of."

He was determined not to turn back for anybody, because he wanted to reach the kingdom of the sky, of which the old man had spoken. The top of the beanstalk was level with the clouds, which today were pushed up in fleecy hillocks, and a road led from it to a tall house, grey as the pastures of the angels, and its huge windows shone with reflected light, as though they were the eyes of gods.

In the doorway, which was as large, the other way round, as the whole front of his home, stood an enormous woman. Owing to her size, her skin seemed very coarse, and the pores showed like pock marks, but she had a kind expression, so that Jack, whose exertions had made his appetite all the keener, plucked up his courage to ask her, "Please ma'am, could you give me some breakfast?"

"You're more likely to find yourself part of somebody else's breakfast, if you stay here," the woman replied, "for my husband is the celebrated ogre, Crunchingbones, and there's nothing he likes so much of a morning as an English boy on toast."

"Well, I may as well risk being eaten myself, as die of hunger," Jack answered.

The good-natured woman smiled at this, took him into the tall house, and placed before him bread and cheese and a bowl of milk which Jack soon consumed. Scarcely had he finished, when the ground began to tremble with a peculiar rhythm. "That's *his* footstep," said the woman. "I warned you. He'll be here in a minute."

She seemed terrified at her husband's approach and, lifting Jack up by his collar, threw him into the oven to hide him, and shut the door; but he could peep into the room through a crack invisible on the outside.

The sound of gigantic footsteps drew nearer, and in a moment Jack saw the form of a vast man enter the room. He threw down on the table two calves he had been carrying, and said to his wife, "There's my breakfast; get it ready for me at once!"

For some minutes he paced up and down the kitchen—then stopped short and sniffed the air in a most frightening way, like a wild animal. Suddenly he howled out in his ferine voice,

"Fee Fi Fo Fum,
I smell the blood of an Englishman!"

"You're imagining things, dear," said his wife. "You don't keep your strength up. You should take more care of yourself."

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" Well, that may be so," answered the giant, mollified.

In the meantime, while Jack trembled in the oven, Mrs Crunchingbones had set to and prepared breakfast for her husband. He ate long and greedily; but the moment he had finished, he dragged from where it stood against the wall opposite him, a large chest, unlocked it, lifted the lid, and took out of it two bags. They contained the gold coins which he proceeded to count until he fell asleep.

Crunchingbones' wife was somewhere at the back of the house, so Jack, creeping out of the oven, seized one of the bags of gold, dropped it into his mother's garden far below, and then swarmed down the beanstalk, home.

At first his mother was angry, for the sack was heavy, and had nearly hit her. " You careless little beggar, you! " she shouted up at him. " One of these days, you'll kill someone! " But she softened when she heard his story and saw what the bag contained.

" You acted correctly, Jack," she commented at the end. " Fair shares for all! He has no right to have more gold coins than we! "

So she and Jack lived on the ogre's hoard until the last gold coin was spent. After which they existed for some time as best they could, borrowing and running into debt, for their spell of temporary prosperity had debauched them.

At last, want of food drove Jack again to explore. The beanstalk still flourished, and he climbed it once more, and once more arrived safely at the ogre's house. Cautiously he entered the kitchen and, after having made sure that the ogre was out, greeted the wife, saying, "Hullo, Mrs. Crunchingbones, ma'am," in rather an offhand manner, as if he saw her every day.

" Hop it, boy! " she replied. " Wasn't it you that I hid here, the very day that my husband missed one of his sacks of gold? "

" Well," he answered, " if I weren't so hungry, I could tell you a few facts about that—they might interest you—but I must eat first."

The ogre's wife again felt sorry for the boy. He seemed too young to have much harm in him, and she could see that he was hungry, so she said, " Sit down over there," indicating a corner near the oven, and brought him a bowl of milk. He had scarcely finished it, when they heard—or rather, in the first place, felt—the ogre's footsteps approaching. Once more the kind woman threw Jack into the oven, and he was able to watch as before. Once more the ogre hungrily sniffed the air. Once more he bellowed out in his angry, ugly voice.

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" Fee Fi Fo Fum,
I smell the blood of an Englishman! "

His wife, however, calmed him, patting him and saying, " There, there, dear; don't carry on! You're tired, and will feel better after breakfast." And she soon produced three broiled oxen for him.

After he had finished his meal, he shouted sleepily, " Bring me my hen! "

Accordingly, his wife brought to him a large red hen, fluttering and cackling in her arms, put it down and left the room.

Crunchingbones commanded, " Lay! " Whereupon the hen clucked again and laid an egg of gold—which puzzled Jack for he had always understood from his mother that it was a goose that laid the golden eggs. Indeed, this discovery first began to undermine his mother's authority.

However, there was no time to waste, or in which to think this out at the moment; and as soon as the ogre fell asleep and began to snore, Jack crept out of his hiding-place and grabbed the hen.

The frightened cackle it put up woke the ogre, but Jack had a good start and was already on his way down the beanstalk before Crunchingbones was out of the house, so that the boy reached home safely with the gold egg in his pocket, and the hen under his arm.

The next time Jack climbed his beanstalk it was not from hunger, for the golden eggs procured him and his mother all, and more than all, that they could wish for. No, now Jack wanted to get rich, and easily-won treasure had fanned his greed for money . . .

The ogre's house seemed empty, and Jack slunk in without meeting the ogre's wife; and on this occasion, for a change, concealed himself in the copper.

Soon Crunchingbones returned. Directly he entered, he stopped, sniffed the air as he had done on previous occasions and, hitting the wooden walls with a stick as big as a tree trunk to make sure that there was no hollow space behind them in which someone could hide, at the same time bawled out his theme-song,

" Fee Fi Fo Fum,
I smell the blood of an Englishman! "

At the sound of his voice, his wife hurried in, saying, " If you really think you do, dear, it will be that little villain from down below again: the boy who stole our gold and our magic hen. If so, he's sure to be in the oven. That's where he was before, if you remember."

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Jack was terrified that it would be the turn of the copper next, for he heard Crunchingbones rush towards the oven, open the door with a bang, and explore it with great blows from his stick. However, that it had proved to be empty must have reassured the ogre, for he did not search the boiler, and after his breakfast of four sheep, roasted, called to his wife, "Bring me my harp of gold!"

When she brought it and left the room, he commanded, "Sing, Harp!" And the harp sang in a golden voice, most touchingly, for more than half an hour, until the ogre fell asleep. Then the harp fell silent for fear its singing should wake him.

As soon as the sound of the giant's snoring replaced its melodious songs, Jack crept noiselessly out of the copper and grasped the harp. But the moment he touched it, it called out, "Master! Master!"

The ogre first stirred in his sleep, and then, feeling that something was amiss, roused himself, and ran to the door just as Jack was disappearing out of sight down the beanstalk. Crunchingbones looked at the plant doubtfully, wondering, no doubt, whether in spite of its size it would support his weight.

But from far below, the harp cried again, "Master! Master!" On hearing this, the ogre threw caution to the winds and, first clutching the beanstalk, began to climb clumsily down it, the whole plant swaying, sagging, and drooping under the unexpected burden.

By this time Jack had reached the ground in safety, and realising what was happening, called, "Mother, Mother, bring me an axe!" She hurried out, but was so startled that she could not move when she saw the giant's leg protruding out of a cloud as he clumsily felt for his next foothold.

Jack, however, snatched the axe from her, and wielded it to some purpose for, at the second blow, he cut the stalk clean in two, and the giant, like an avalanche of flesh, fell to the ground with a tremendous crash, making it shake as though an earthquake were in progress, and carrying the top of the beanstalk with him. His head was broken and, after a minute, there sounded a death rattle from him like a great hurricane.

Now it was to Jack that the harp sang, "Master! Master!"

In London, and in the provinces, too, Jack and his mother gave concerts regularly for the harp, which learnt to sing Gounod's *Ave Maria*, and made much money for them. Indeed, the house was invariably sold out.

With this exceptional musical instrument and, in addition, with the hen as their capital, they started the Golden Egg Bonus

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Company, a dairy and grocer's shop, combined with a lending library. As Jack could not read, his chief wish—for he affected to despise books, or book-learning, as he termed it—was to get every new offending volume out of the shop as soon as it arrived in it, and this gave an appearance of keenness.

The business started in quite a small way: regular customers —those who had spent enough money, without realising that it was too much—were invited to draw a ticket out of a bag, and if it had printed on it a particular number, announced beforehand, the fortunate client found himself awarded an egg of gold. This novel system of bonus continually brought in new and enthusiastic clients, until the smaller competitive shops became deserted and were bought up by the new company. Soon branches of it opened in every large city and prosperous manufacturing town in England and the United States.

Jack and his mother now found themselves in the world of big business, and before long proceeded to sponsor the famous Golden Egg Television and Radio programmes, in which the Golden Harp was a favourite performer. They owned yachts and rented grouse-moors in Scotland.

But all this work, all this prosperity and luxury, brought their own drawbacks. Jack never married, and his mother was too old and set in her ways to make an ideal hostess. Moreover, Jack, unable to read, was bored in his leisure hours.

His new friends thought him eccentric for, conscious that the improvement in his circumstances had all followed on climbing a beanstalk, he persisted every day in climbing trees, though he was now of middle age, and guests could not help being surprised when they heard their host hail them from some leafy fastness at the top of oak or chestnut. His mother would try to break him of this habit, but she failed. In fact, he had developed what is now called a fixation.

His move to a large mansion in London served to make his eccentricity only more evident. And one morning Lord Beanstalk, as he was now called, for he had lately been created a Viscount, was found by the police at the top of an elm, known to be unsafe, in Kensington Gardens. They ordered him to come down, but he refused, and in the ensuing struggle—for, ignorant as they were of his identity, they sent up firemen on ladders to capture him—he fell and was killed.

His solitary and grieving mother did not long outlive him, and the nationalisation of the Golden Egg Bonus Company that followed.

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ELIANE

English husbands are slightly mad—
especially when they marry French girls

BY GEORGE LANGELAAN

THE first time I saw it was on a Saturday afternoon, shortly before Christmas, when Renée had dragged me out to do a little shopping. Doing a little shopping with Renée, or I suppose with any Parisian housewife, really means doing an awful lot of wandering round from department to department and floor to floor of one or more of the big Paris stores. Renée's favourite was one of the biggest, quite close to the Opéra.

Like every Parisian girl, she knew exactly where everything was to be found, but before buying it she had to have her look round. That explains why French husbands are rarely to be seen accompanying their wives on such expeditions. Although we had been married ten years, I still did accompany her when she asked me to. But, of course, it is well known that English husbands are slightly mad, especially when they marry French girls.

We had come to buy candles and table-napkins. Candles were to be found on the lower ground floor and napkins on the fifth floor, but for some time now we had been wandering round the second floor. At my gentle hint that we should perhaps go up or down, Renée laughed. "I know, but I just want to see something." And she started turning over rolls of silk which she had no intention of buying. "Please, John, just wait here a minute while I have a look at that velvet over there."

Leaning against a bronze-and-brass balustrade, I looked down at the milling crowd two floors below. It is always amusing to see the way women wander round and round counters, rather like swishing moths circling a light. The hum of voices, the melodious clanging of mysterious bells in the warm, scented atmosphere would have been quite pleasant but for the cold business-like ringing of a cash register somewhere to my right.

It was then that I felt someone was looking at me.

Probably Renée, I thought, making up my mind not to look round. But when one is aware of a steady gaze fixed on the back of one's neck, it soon becomes unbearable, and at last I swung round, almost angry, to see who it could be.

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There was no one . . .

I looked carefully, but though there were people at a counter farther along, no one was gazing in my direction.

Annoyed, I was about to move a few paces, just to make sure that no one was hiding behind the dummy, when I looked up and saw.

With silk draped over its shoulder, round its body, and over its extended arm, the dummy was staring at me.

It was modern, and smart, and inhuman, with its long, velvet lashes over dark violet eyes, its straight, black hair tied in a bun at the back of the neck, its pointed, sophisticated nose that swept ridiculously up to a chiselled, flat tip, and its impossible mouth with blue-purple lips contrasting painfully with the creamy, ochre complexion of the elongated, bony face.

Had I been slightly taller or shorter, or standing anywhere else, I should not have found myself so exactly in line with the dummy's gaze. It seemed to smile at me, as if amused. Feeling suddenly ridiculous, I shrugged my shoulders, walked up to it, and pretended to examine the material wound round its feet.

" John, I've been trying to attract your attention for the last five minutes. Do come, we'll be late," said Renée, pushing me aside, and looking at the material draped round the dummy.

It was while hunting for a birthday present for Renée a few weeks later that I saw it for the second time.

I was walking from one window display to the next, looking for something that might please her. The moment I set eyes on the black-and-gold lacquered box, I knew my quest was over. I was peering at it, wondering if I could afford it, when I felt a presence, as if someone was looking at me. The impression was so strong that I expected to see a window dresser at work. But no, there was only a wardrobe, a modern lampstand and, in a comfortable armchair, looking me straight in the face, a dummy dressed in a silk-embroidered Chinese gown.

I immediately recognised the velvet eyelashes, the arched eyebrows, and the creamy, ochre face with the impossible nose. Again, had I been a little to left or right of where I was standing, or had I bent a little lower to examine the lacquered box in the window, the dummy's gaze would not have met mine.

Was it the same dummy, I wondered? It seemed to be, but there were dozens like it: some had fair hair and blue eyes, others had short, auburn curls, but all had the same face made from the same mould. They were, perhaps, fashionable dummies, but certainly not very attractive. In some ways they were even ugly, I thought—like caricatures of sophisticated women.

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Yes, like caricatures, I thought—moving on to other windows, and trying to meet the gaze of other dummies. No, there was something different: their eyes were dead under the velvet eyelashes. The dummy in the Chinese gown had probably been finished differently. Without even realising it, the man who had stuck on the lashes, or perhaps the one who had set the eyes in their sockets, had accidentally done something to give it that strange, lifelike look of interest.

Was it a look of interest, though? I tried to see it in my mind's eye, as I sometimes try to remember a face, but I could not. Ridiculous! I thought, turning back and walking quickly through the people crowding the pavement outside the window where the dummy in the Chinese gown was seated.

The dummy was in the same pose in the chair, except that the head was now turned to the right, towards the side of the window where I had just appeared, and was looking me straight in the face. Surely I must have been mistaken, I thought, moving to the other end of the window. But no, there was the lacquered box from which I had looked up into the dummy's eyes and now, from the same spot, I could see only its profile. How silly of me! Of course, the dummy's head must have been turned by a window dresser, who probably thought it would look better that way.

Satisfied with this explanation of an otherwise inexplicable phenomenon, I walked across the pavement to the bus stop. A few moments later my bus came along and, as the people ahead of me clambered on, I glanced over my shoulder and swore softly. This time, the dummy was looking neither left nor right, but straight ahead, straight at me where I stood rooted to the ground.

On my easel at the advertising agency where I worked were a lot of tedious layouts to be prepared. I sat down and set to like an automaton, hating it all. At half past five I got up, washed my hands, put on my hat and coat, and walked out. I had decided that, before going home, I would clear up the mystery of the dummy. The store would be closed, but I knew the windows were illuminated till past midnight, and that was all that was necessary for the little experiment I had in mind.

Keeping close to the other windows, I approached, from the left, the one with the strange dummy. If it was looking at me, then the head would have to be turned as it had been in the morning. I stopped and stood for quite a while gazing at the goods in the window next to it. Finally, like a diver making up his mind, I took one quick step forward. The dummy was looking straight at me and, in the glare of artificial light, the eyes

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seemed even brighter than in the daytime. It was not really smiling, but the parted lips seemed more human, less of a caricature. She looked as if she was about to speak, as if she wanted to say something.

For a long time I stood there. I had moved a little to one side because somehow I could not stand that gaze for very long. Remembering why I had come, I walked slowly past the window and just out of sight of the dummy. I counted ten and walked back—and the dummy had turned her head.

This won't do, I thought. I must pull myself together. Standing out of the line of vision, I examined the dummy coldly, with the eyes of an artist. The legs were too long, the feet too small, and the hands much too narrow, with spidery, elongated fingers. I could not judge the rest of the anatomy because of the ample Chinese gown. The neck—also much too long—did not, however, show any trace of being able to turn.

Several times I started walking away and each time, like a magnet, the dummy's gaze drew me back. Whenever our eyes met, I sensed an extraordinary moment of warmth and life.

Renée was furious when at last I reached home. I had forgotten that neighbours were coming for our weekly game of bridge. They arrived as I was gulping down a cold omelette in the kitchen. As usual, we set the alarm clock for midnight but, as often happened, we played on till almost two.

In bed, I tossed and turned for the rest of the night. It was only while shaving the next morning that I again thought seriously about the dummy. My face looked awful, and my thoughts were none too pleasant as I scraped my chin. In the cold light of morning it all seemed fairly obvious: either there was an explanation, or I was crazy.

Feeling better after a cup of coffee and refusing to think too much about it—a little like trying not to wake out of some interesting dream—I decided that, before going to work, I would just see if she was still there, if she would still look at me, if there was still a mystery.

My heart beating like that of a schoolboy on his first date, I hesitated before walking to the window.

When I finally did so, I deliberately looked down, but a glow of pleasure swept through me because I could feel her gaze. I looked up with a smile, and our eyes met and clung. Again I tried my experiment of walking out of sight and back, and each time the dummy's head was turned so that our eyes met. When I finally tore myself away, I was almost an hour late for work.

At lunch-time I rushed round and stopped in front of the window. It was empty. Everything in it had been taken out.

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" A pity she has gone," said a man standing next to me, making me jump.

" What do you mean? "

" Oh, nothing, monsieur, nothing," he said with a leer. Raising his hat, he walked away.

There had been something unsavoury about the jaunty angle of his hat, his long, thin moustache, and the cut of his pearl-grey overcoat. Dressed like the idle youngsters who are to be found morning, noon, and night in most of the bars along the Champs Elysées, but unable to look less than sixty, he was the type of tango expert whom girls in their teens consider to be Prince Charming.

I was about to go after him for an explanation when I realised that the whole thing was becoming ridiculous, and decided to forget all about it. It was not the sort of adventure one is likely to forget but, after a while, I became quite sure that I had really imagined it all.

Renée's birthday was now fast approaching and, much as I disliked the idea, I was finally obliged to go back to the shop.

" This way please, monsieur," said the shop girl who sold me the black-and-gold lacquered box.

On my way to the cash desk, I was searching for the five-thousand-franc note in the back pocket of my wallet when I bumped into the corner of a stand. I looked up—our eyes met!

This time, she was so near that I could have touched her. And this time I knew there was something extraordinary, because her velvet eyelashes were not eighteen inches away and, under them, the violet eyes were real.

" Excuse me," I mumbled, turning away. Thinking that I must be terribly short-sighted, two girls giggled.

After paying for my purchase, I came back to the stand. I had not been out of her line of sight on my way to the cash desk, so her head had not moved. I stood looking at her for quite a while. This time she was wearing a neat afternoon frock. Under it, her breasts were rounded, but her waist was too small, and her impossible heart-shaped hips ridiculous and too narrow.

Aware that an attendant was looking at me, I pretended to examine the dress she was wearing. I had the silly but thrilling impression that she caught her breath and that, though she was looking the other way towards the spot where I had first bumped into the stand, she was watching me out of the corner of her eye. Touching the sleeve and the arm under it, I could have sworn her cheeks had flushed under the strange ochre of her make-up.

" It's madness, sheer madness," I whispered, turning round and bumping into the old beau.

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He smiled, raised his hat, and said, " Monsieur, I see that you know my friend. The friends of my friends are my friends and therefore . . ."

Silly old fool, I thought, without answering. Pushing past him, I remembered that the spot where she stood was visible from the second-floor gallery. That would be a definite test, for those dummies were certainly not made to look up.

There was a crowd near the lift, so I went up by the escalator and at last reached the balustrade against which I had been leaning the first time I felt her looking at me.

The stand was difficult to locate in the crowd moving below, but I soon noticed the only upturned face. Yes, it was hers. Her position had not changed: one hand holding the skirt of her frock, and the other slightly extended. But instead of looking down at the people passing, she was looking up, straight at me. And standing close to her, his hat in his hand, the old beau seemed to be conversing with her. He looked up, following her gaze, spotted me, and bowed slightly.

Apart from my doctor, who would immediately have imagined things which only doctors can imagine, I could think of no one I dared tell. But that afternoon I went back, and the following day, and the next. I simply had to see her, feel her looking at me, into me, and through me.

Once, I went up quite close. I wanted to find out whether her eyes were made of glass. It was not easy to see beneath the thick lashes, but I could have sworn that under that strange, ochre make-up, the skin was real—I could almost see the light blue vein that ran close to her nose.

" You are beautiful," I whispered. " What is your name? "

And I shouldered through the crowd almost brutally in order to get away because I was frightened. Of course her lips had not moved and no sound had come from them, yet she had answered. She had answered inside me, inside my head. In a whisper similar to mine, it seemed, she had answered the single word, " Eliane."

By the main entrance was another dummy, exactly like her; same face, same dark hair tied in a bun at the back of the neck. I stopped to look closely at the eyes. There was no possible doubt, they were made of glass and were dusty in the corners. Not three feet away was the old beau who, evidently reading my thoughts, smiled and shook his head as he raised his hat.

Though it was still early in the afternoon, I ordered a Pernod at the counter of the first café I came to. I was sure of two basic facts: I was not insane, and I had not imagined anything about that dummy. Since I was not mad, there must be some fantastic

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mystery, and that mystery must be solved. The only other possibility was that I was going mad, or had already gone mad without knowing it. But would I then have been reasoning quietly like this? Had anyone else come to tell me that a dummy, without being alive, was not really a dummy, and communicated with people by speaking into their heads without being heard, I should have been convinced of that person's insanity and, who knows, might even have considered him dangerous. But this was different since I knew that it was true. And I was not alone, there was also that old beau. What did he know? I wondered. What had he to do with it all?

The next day she had disappeared from her stand. For over an hour I wandered from floor to floor, looking for her. I guessed that she was probably stored somewhere, or being prepared for some other display. Did she know that I had been looking for her, I wondered, as I walked miserably all the way home?

"John, what is the matter? Something is worrying you. Are you having trouble at the studio?"

"Why, no, no. What makes you think . . .?"

"There is something on your mind, John. You can't hide it. What is it?"

"Nothing, dear, really."

"Nothing's name couldn't be Eliane, could it?"

"What do you mean?"

"So there is an Eliane," said Renée, very pale, putting down her knife and fork.

"Don't be ridiculous! What are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? You ought to know," said Renée, bursting into tears. "You don't talk any more, you don't look at me and—and you spend hours drawing pictures of the ugliest, trumpet-nosed, street-walking—yes, that's it—probably a prostitute, with a face like that."

"She is not a prostitute!" I shouted, and then I laughed. "Don't you realise that it was not the picture of a girl, that no living girl could possibly have such a face? It is the head of a dummy used in a big department store. We are doing a job for the store, and had thought of using some of their dummies in our layouts. That is why I went to make sketches of it. Oh, you silly girl!"

"Since when have dummies had names?" asked Renée, still sniffing.

"It is simply a type of dummy that the makers call Eliane."

So it had reached the point where Renée had noticed, I

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thought, as I was shaving next morning. The whole thing was ridiculous. I would put a stop to it.

For two whole days I did not go near the shop. On the morning of the third day, I arrived almost half an hour before opening time. Of course, the dummy attracted me, but it was not only that; there was also the mystery which I simply had to solve. Once solved, I felt that all would be well again.

The only thing to do was to talk it over with her. How it could be managed in a shop always full of people, I didn't know, but first I had to find her.

A uniformed attendant at last unlocked and opened the door, and I was the first inside. Taking the escalator, I went up to the sixth floor. I knew full well that she would not be there, because it was the furniture department; but since I had decided on a systematic search, I might as well start at the top.

I inspected each floor before descending to the next.

She was in the raincoat department on the fourth floor. I found her standing quite close to a window at the end of a long, double row of brass racks supporting hundreds of mackintoshes. She was looking over her shoulder, straight at me, as I walked along the row. She was very smart in a light blue raincoat; and the blue velvet beret perched on her head made her prettier still.

" Eliane, darling! Eliane," I whispered.

She seemed to flush slightly, and when my fingers touched her gloved hand, it shook a little as if she was trembling.

" Eliane, what are you? You must tell me. I will help you! "

" Can I help you, monsieur? " asked a giggling girl over my shoulder.

" I was—er—I was just wondering if this would fit my wife, mademoiselle."

" The models on the dummies are very small, but we have that one in all sizes. What are your wife's measurements, monsieur? "

" I'm afraid I don't know. I'll have to find out and come back," I said, with a last look at Eliane, who seemed to be smiling impishly.

Just as I turned to leave, the old beau arrived, saluted me gravely, and said something to the assistant, who laughed. I clenched my teeth, dug my hands into my overcoat pockets, and walked away rapidly.

How on earth could I engineer a quiet ten minutes with Eliane? This could not go on much longer; people would begin to notice me. For all I knew, I had already been observed and was perhaps being watched and followed in the shop.

Asking to buy a dummy would not get me anywhere, I knew. To come with Renée and buy her a raincoat was no solution.

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I could not imagine Renée standing by while I was having a confidential talk with Eliane. If only I could come at night. But under what pretence could I get in?

And then I found the solution. I must find a good hiding-place, conceal myself in it a little before closing time, and wait till everyone had left. I would then have Eliane to myself for as long as we needed. She would be able to explain everything, and I would find a way of helping her. As for getting out, I would simply wait for the shop to be opened the following morning. After wandering round a little, I would walk quietly away.

Back at the studio, I telephoned Renée that I would be working very late, possibly all night, on a special rush job for an important client.

Half an hour before closing time, I entered the shop with a crowd of last-minute customers; but instead of taking one of the lifts or even the escalator, I went up from floor to floor by different staircases. On each landing, I made sure I was not being watched or followed.

In the furniture department on the sixth floor there were no customers; only two salesmen talking by a window. Walking quietly up and down long lines of bedroom, drawing-room, and dining-room suites, I occasionally stopped to press my hands on a cushion, or open a wardrobe.

I soon found the ideal hiding-place, an immense, old-fashioned wardrobe. A bell clanged as one of the salesmen came my way. I looked at my watch and made for the exit staircase, but once out of sight of the salesman, I slipped behind a dresser. As soon as I had seen him go by, I walked quietly back to the wardrobe I had chosen, looked right and left, opened the door, stepped in, and pulled it to behind me.

For a long time bells clanged and people walked past. A little later, lift doors banged and rattled, and heavy objects were wheeled up and down on either side of my wardrobe. People talked loudly.

Twice I snapped on my lighter just long enough to see the time by my watch. It was past nine before silence reigned. I was on the point of pushing open the door of my prison when I heard more footsteps. They passed slowly—one of the first rounds, I thought, wondering if they were at regular intervals.

Patiently, I waited ten minutes before opening the wardrobe. Only one bulb, halfway down the department, was alight. Outside, I could hear the Paris traffic in the wet street but inside all was silent. By the stairs I listened again. Somewhere far down, I heard voices—probably another round.

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Keeping to the shadowy side of the stairs, I tiptoed rapidly to the next floor and, after listening carefully again, down to the fourth. I knew exactly where Eliane was, but intended first to find a hiding-place near her. Therefore, instead of approaching her directly, I dived behind the racks of raincoats towards some long counters I had noticed. I soon found one under which I could hide easily.

I was now within a few feet of Eliane and, advancing silently on my hands and knees, I reached the end of a counter, saw her feet, and looked up into her smiling eyes. There was no light near, but I could see her face quite clearly.

" Eliane," I whispered, getting up and stepping across to her. " You knew that I would come? "

She was still looking down at the the spot where I had appeared round the end of the counter, and her attitude showed that she had been waiting, that she was happy.

" Eliane," I said, grasping her hands and shuddering at the stiffness of her fingers. But she was blushing, and the hard little hands I was holding in mine were trembling slightly.

" Eliane, Eliane," I repeated, sliding my arm round her waist under her open raincoat; and something told me that the strange ticking I could now hear was her heart. With my left hand, I tried to raise her chin. It, too, was hard, though not so hard as her hands, and it resisted, but I could feel the warmth of her breath on my fingers.

She must have heard the footsteps, too, for her arm went round me and held me, as if to hide and protect me. I turned and found myself holding the dummy, ridiculously light, in my arms. The footsteps were getting nearer and I tried to put her down, but her arm was tight over my shoulder. To run now would be foolish, I thought. The only thing was to stand dead still between the racks of raincoats. There was very little light and I had a chance of not being seen.

As I stepped back, rather like an awkward dancer trying not to walk on his partner's feet, I stumbled against a stool which went spinning along the polished floor.

" Who's there? " a voice shouted, a light flashed in my eyes.

Holding Eliane close to me, I crouched behind another row of raincoats. Someone was running round the other end so, stepping back again, I dashed for the stairs. A thick carpet softened the sound of my feet, but the voice shouted again as my shadow swept over the ceiling.

I reached the staircase.

Despite the dummy's legs in front of me, I sprang up the stairs two at a time. We reached the sixth floor safely and,

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sneaking into my hiding-place with her, I closed the door.

Head down, heart thumping wildly, I listened. Somewhere below, a bell was ringing continuously.

"Eliane, it is all right now. We are safe here," I whispered, crushing her fiercely in my arms.

Again I heard the strange ticking of her heart under the hard, round breast. Slowly, slowly, she was raising her head against my shoulder. The soft velvet of her eyelashes brushed my cheek, and the warm satin of her hard cheek nestled against my ear. Just as slowly her head went back and, although it was quite dark, I knew that Eliane was looking at me and that her half-open, smiling mouth was coming up towards mine.

Footsteps suddenly came close to us and stopped. As I crushed and bruised my lips on Eliane's mouth, the door was wrenched open.

"Ca, alors!" said a gruff voice, with a burst of laughter. "Lovers! How did you—?"

"Fool!" I shouted, smashing my fist into the loose, yellow teeth under the bushy, white moustache of the night-watchman, and rushed towards the stairs with Eliane under my arm.

"Stop!" shouted a man at the top, his arms outstretched.

Turning sharply, I raced between furniture suites towards the escalator. Hugging Eliane, I flew down the metal steps.

On the fourth floor, at the end of the raincoat department for which I was heading, two men came shouting towards us. Swerving, I just managed to reach the escalator and ran down to the third floor. I could hear my pursuers. I had almost reached the first floor when I slipped and fell.

All the lights flashed on and, with a sudden jerk, the escalator started moving under me. By the time I was on my feet we were already halfway up to the second floor.

"Stop!" shouted a voice behind me, and a bullet whined past my head.

Holding Eliane close to me, so light, so silent, and so strangely stiff, I dashed for the escalator leading to the third floor.

Another shot exploded. Nearer, I thought, and Eliane started in my arms.

I looked back and saw no one, but a third shot broke a mirror I had just passed.

I leaned over the handrail, not realising that we had almost reached the third floor. I felt my head bump against the ceiling, and managed to draw it back in time; but Eliane, who had also leaned over with me, suddenly cracked and snapped as yet another shot exploded, this time right in my head. I reeled round, trying desperately to clutch Eliane as gongs clanged and

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fearful, glowing lights shot round in all directions, and dropped into a great, swirling, black hole, gasping for air, and holding in my closed hand something round and soft and moist.

Once I came to with a white light, like a glass sun, glowing full in my face; but something on one side of my nose prevented me from seeing the beast that was tearing at my cheek.

Renée, blurred and in a haze, was bending over me when I finally woke up. "Don't touch," she said, as I tried to feel the bandage round my head.

"Renée, what happened?"

"That is what I want you to tell me, monsieur," said a man, suddenly leaning over Renée's shoulder and pushing her aside.

"Who are you?"

"A police inspector. Your accomplices got away and left you stranded, didn't they? What were you after?"

"After? Accomplices? What are you talking about? I have no accomplices. Eliane! What happened to—?"

"That's right. Who was Eliane? What was her job?"

"I am sorry, Inspector, but I can't have you bothering the patient yet. A little later, we shall see," said a man in white, putting his fingers on my wrist.

"I'll pay for any damage, but I did nothing wrong. I am not a thief. But I must know about Eliane."

"Come, who is Eliane? Just tell me that and I'll go," said the policeman.

"Can't you see he is ill?" said Renée fiercely. "If you must know, Eliane is a dummy he has been working on. Yes, a dummy like those you see in shop windows."

Renée spent the night on a camp-bed which had been set up in the room.

Every time I moved, she was up like a shot to arrange my pillow or give me something to drink.

"I'm sorry, Renée, I am afraid I can't sleep."

"All right, dear. Would you like to tell me all about it?"

"Renée, I was mad. No, not that sort of madness . . ."

Perhaps I should never have told Renée about it, about Eliane. But who else could I have told? The very first thing she did in the morning was to tell the doctor. The result was that two other doctors were called in, and I had to tell them my story. The only good result was that they soon got rid of the police inspector when he showed up.

They were evidently psychiatrists, and just as evidently thought me mad.

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They never said so, but their method of asking questions and suggesting answers proved it. They talked about Eliane not as a dummy but as a person, as if they really believed my story. I should have kept quiet when the doctor came to change my bandage, but it was all so unexpected, and they were watching me like two hawks.

Without saying anything, the doctor drew on a pair of rubber gloves, while a nurse undid the bandage round my head. Gently he lifted off a thick wad of cotton wool and then, with a pair of tweezers, delicately pulled off another bandage that stuck a little and made me shudder.

"Are you going to change the one on my eye?" I asked apprehensively.

"This will perhaps shock you, monsieur, but you must be told: you have lost your eye."

"Is there no hope at all?"

"No, monsieur. Your eye was shot out of its socket; it is a miracle you are still alive."

"I see—I mean, I understand," I said slowly, with a smile, as the doctor bent over me. "What happened to my eye?"

"You were holding it in your hand when you were brought here the night before last."

"Are you sure, Doctor? What colour was it?"

"Darkish, I think, like your other eye. Why?"

"Doctor, take a look at my other eye. What colour is it?"

"Yes, blue, of course. You see, it was full of blood and filth, and I did not take much notice."

"That's a pity, because it was not my eye at all. It was Eliane's eye."

There was a short silence, and I could feel that the surgeon and the other doctors were looking at each other.

"Yes, I see," said the surgeon at last. "That explains the difference."

"No, you don't see, and you think I'm mad, but I'm not! It is simply that I cannot explain—and—and since you have never come across anything like it before, you cannot imagine that it could be true, that it is true. Your only reaction, which you are certain is most scientific, is that I am insane. If you must have me certified, go ahead and enjoy yourselves . . .

"But, deep down in your minds, something tells you that I am not really insane. That much I can see in your faces with my one eye."

"Now, don't get so excited, monsieur. Who was speaking of—?"

"No one, I know. You may be good psychiatrists, but you

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are damn poor liars, so please stop treating me like a child."

"We are not doing so, and you must not worry. You are not the first or the last to have such—such strange things happen to him or, shall we say, believe that such strange things have happened. That will pass. You have probably been overworked, but you will soon be well again."

"All right, if that is the way it must be. I knew that telling the truth wouldn't help. Renée should never have talked me into it."

"Your wife was quite right, and acted in your best interests."

Although she avoided the subject, I knew that Renée was the one person who really believed me and who, therefore, believed in the existence of Eliane. She advised me, however, not to insist, and to stop referring to Eliane as a person in my conversation with the doctors.

When I returned home a week later, I knew that there would be no prosecution or trial, on condition that I paid for a broken mirror and a smashed dummy. Renée had arranged it all. She had also told my employers that I had had an accident while cleaning a loaded pistol.

Since the papers had not got hold of the real story, my firm had believed her and sympathised.

Drawing was a little difficult at first, but I soon got used to my one eye.

Life became normal, though not quite what it had been. Renée had changed somewhat, and I could well understand it. About Eliane, she had been splendid and had forgiven me. Forgiveness does not, however, undo an offence, and even though her rival had been only a dummy, the rival had been very real.

On the doctor's advice, we had given up going to the cinema together. I had once insisted on going, but came back with such a raging headache that I had not tried again. However, I insisted that Renée should go with our neighbours every week.

I suffered quite a lot from headaches and insomnia. Renée never complained, but she was such a light sleeper that I could not help waking her every time I moved, so I finally insisted on sleeping in the next room. Little by little, we slowly drifted apart. On one or two occasions, Renée dined with friends and once she even spent a whole weekend away from home.

I did not realise how hopeless things were becoming until the night Renée was driven home in one of those fearfully ugly, but terribly expensive, foreign cars. It was long past midnight when I saw her getting out of it.

A man accompanied her to the door, and I suddenly felt that I

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must know more about him. I closed my door softly behind me, and tiptoed up to the next landing.

They were both coming up slowly, and Renée was laughing. By leaning over the banisters, I could see the man's arm round her waist. As she reached our landing, I heard her fumbling for her keys.

I peeped over the banisters but the man had his back turned. He was holding Renée in his arms and what I had expected happened. She slowly put her arms round his neck and kissed him again and again. Sweating and trembling, I at last heard the man running lightly down the stairs and, a moment later, Renée's key in the door.

"Why, John, I thought you were asleep," said my wife.

"No, I was not. But don't worry, Renée, it's all right, my dear. I understand."

"John—"

"Please don't worry, dear. We can talk it over tomorrow, or another day, but I want you to know now that—that you are free, and that I understand. Good night."

Renée said no more and, naturally enough, I didn't refer to the incident on the stairs. I had tried to make it easy for her, should she ever want to broach the subject again. I suppose I should have known Renée was not the sort of girl to leave things in the air.

I rather suspect she drugged me that night. It certainly seems surprising that I slept so well, so soundly, and so late—so soundly that all her preparations failed to rouse me, and so late that I awoke only when Renée opened the shutters and I heard the doctors' voices.

The psychiatrist I recognised immediately.

I sat up, staring at him.

"What the devil—?" I felt something hard against my leg.

"Good lord!" I gasped, looking at the dummy in bed by my side. "Where did this come from? Renée, what does all this mean?"

"You see," said Renée, sniffing into her handkerchief, "either he does not remember all the horrible things—" she shuddered—"or he is acting, pretending he is not mad, trying to fool you again."

"No, no, of course not," said the psychiatrist. "He is coming with us, and we will make him well."

"You little beast!" I shouted, jumping out of bed.

Renée retreated between the two hefty men in white uniforms standing by the door.

In the next room, I saw him put his arm round her shoulder,

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as though to protect her, a thing he would certainly not have dared to do had we been alone.

He knew I had recognised him.

He smiled and bowed slightly. There was a sneer of triumph and revenge—revenge for Eliane—on the old beau's face as he patted Renée's head nestling on his shoulder. Still looking at me, he whispered something in her ear and led her away, his arm round her waist, a bare second before the men in white dived at me like rugger players.

© George Langelaan 1958

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TOP OF THE TREE

Every little boy, as the song says . . . has lots of fun With his trumpet and his gun, while Every little girl would like to be The fairy on the Christmas tree . . . Even if you have never attained either of these ambitions, you can top our tree with seven out of seven.

If a twig snaps, try page 107.

1. *If your Christmas dinner had the following menu, whom would you assume your host to be? Tear Clock Myrtle, Mackled Pickerel, Murky Tints with Oiled Bunions and Natty Poodles, Tarcle Treat.*

2. *What hero of a detective story by a well-known contemporary writer received a message for help carried by a learned rat in a Scottish castle at ten minutes to midnight on Christmas Eve?*

3. *Who celebrated Christmas by attending a meeting in the Hons.' cupboard at which she learnt of her aunt's engagement?*

4. *Who wrote these stirring lines?*

   Once again, once again,
   Christmas wreaths are twining;
   Once again, once again,
   Mistletoe is shining.

5. *Whose Christmas pudding had "a smell like an eating-house and a pastrycook's next door to each other, with a laundress's next door to that?"*

6. *Helleborus niger—what is its more seasonable name?*

7. *McGinnis and McGinty had a Christmas tree hung with candies and bits of apple; when they had eaten all these the thrifty McGinty made off with the tree.*
   Who were they?

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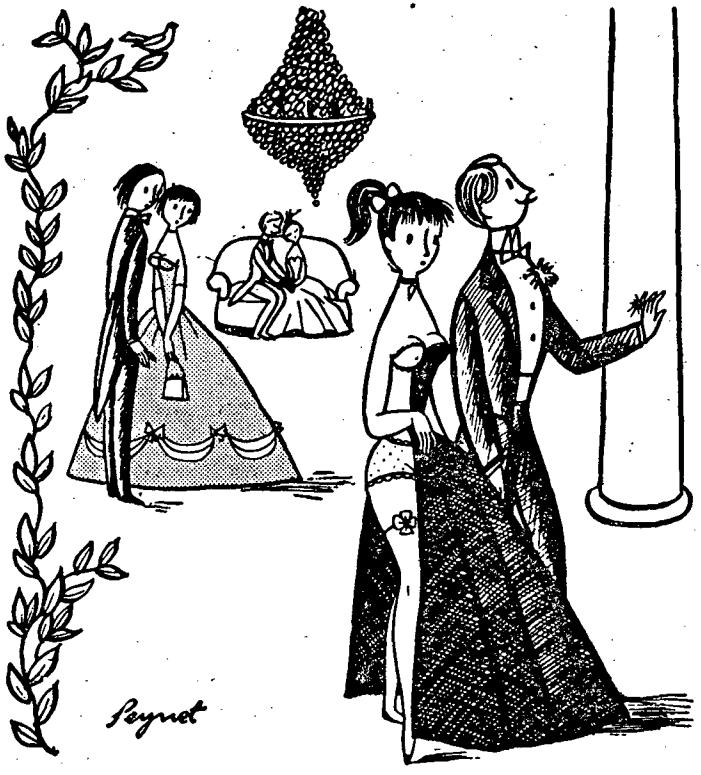

" If you ask me, he's only half in love with her "

SEXTET is a selection of drawings from
The Lovers' Keepsake
by RAYMOND PEYNET

Peynet approaches his dedicated field with the delicacy of a poet, writes Ronald Searle. Through the exploits of his unique lovers, the Poète and his Fiancée, we share a world of innocent delights and fantasies.

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" Goodness ! You must be rather fast "

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" Not guilty this time ! "

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" Pass me my pyjamas, dearest "

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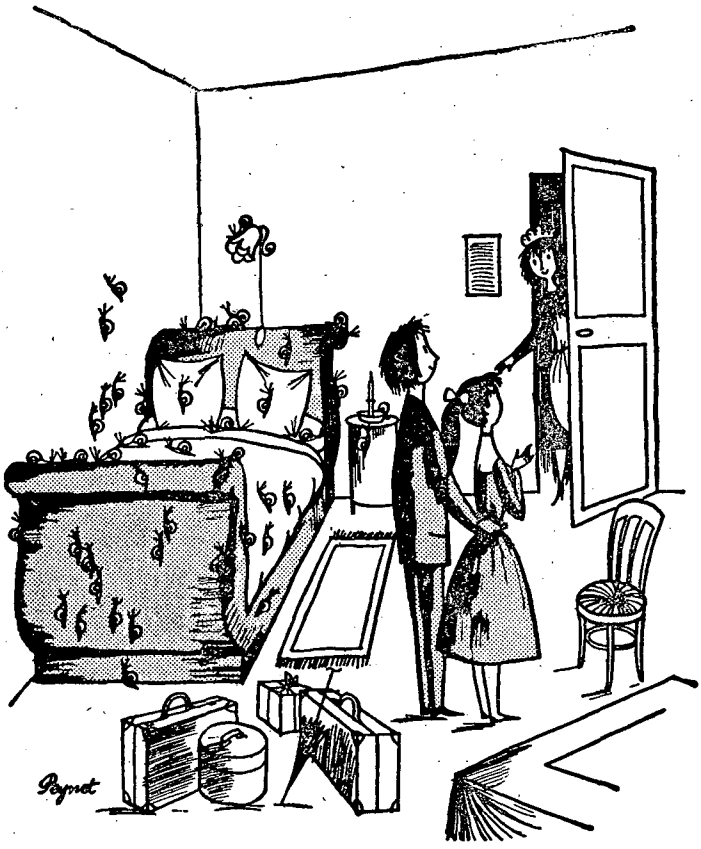

" The management of the Hotel Escargot wishes you a pleasant night "

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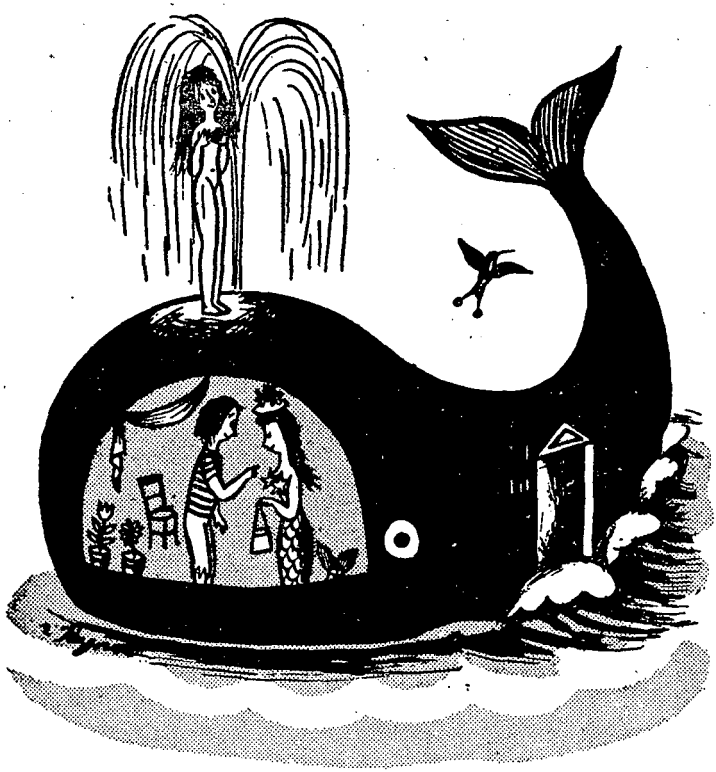

" Denise will be down in a minute. She's in the shower "

Peynet—perhaps the most Parisian of French cartoonists—lives, as one might expect, in Paris, and has a restored château in the south of France. He married the original and only " Elle," an art student called Denise. Peynet is now a household word on both sides of the Channel, and when Her Majesty the Queen made her State Visit in 1957, the Ville de Paris commissioned Peynet to design twelve delightful dolls for Princess Anne

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SANCTUARY

" Crime in Chipping Cleghorn again," he said cheerfully

BY AGATHA CHRISTIE

THE Vicar's wife came round the corner of the Vicarage with her arms full of chrysanthemums. A good deal of rich garden soil was attached to her strong brogue shoes and a few fragments of earth were adhering to her nose, but of that fact she was perfectly unconscious.

She had a slight struggle opening the Vicarage gate which hung, rustily, half off its hinges. Some of the chrysanthemums fell to the ground. Mrs. Harmon bent to retrieve them with an ejaculation which was not quite in keeping with Vicarage standards. A puff of wind caught at her battered felt hat, causing it to sit even more rakishly than it had done before. " Bother! " said Bunch, toning down her language.

Christened by her optimistic parents " Diana," Mrs. Harmon had become " Bunch " at an early age for somewhat obvious reasons, and the name had stuck to her ever since. Retrieving the chrysanthemums, she made her way through the lich-gate to the churchyard, and so into the church.

" Br-r-r-rh! " said Bunch. " I'd better get on with this quickly. I don't want to die of cold."

With the quickness born of practice she collected vases, water, flower-holders. I wish we had lilies, she thought. I get so tired of these scraggy chrysanthemums.

Her nimble fingers arranged the blooms in their holders. There was nothing particularly original or artistic about the decorations, for Bunch Harmon herself was neither original nor artistic, but it was a homely and pleasant arrangement. Carrying the vases carefully, Bunch stepped up the aisle and made her way towards the altar.

As she did so, the sun came out. It shone through the east window of crude, coloured glass, mostly blue and red—the gift of a wealthy Victorian churchgoer. The effect was almost startling in its sudden oriental opulence. Like jewels, thought Bunch. Suddenly she stopped, staring ahead of her.

On the chancel steps was a huddled dark form.

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Carefully putting down the flowers, Bunch went up to it and bent over it. Just for a moment she thought it might be an old coat or a bundle of clothes thrown down, but she now saw that her first impression had been correct. It was a man lying there, huddled over on himself.

Bunch knelt down by him and slowly, carefully, she turned him over. For a moment she had thought that he was dead, but she realised now that he was still alive. Her fingers went to his pulse —a pulse so feeble and fluttering that it told its own story, as did the almost greenish pallor of his face.

There was no doubt that the man was dying.

He was about forty-five, dressed in a dark, shabby suit. She laid down the limp hand she had picked up and looked at his other hand. This was clenched like a fist on his breast, the fingers closed over what seemed to be a large wad or handkerchief. All round the clenched hand there were splashes of a brown fluid which, Bunch guessed, was dry blood. She sat back on her heels, frowning, as she wondered in her usual slow, commonsense way what was the best thing to be done.

Up till now the man's eyes had been closed, but at this point they suddenly opened and fixed themselves on Bunch's face. They were neither dazed nor wandering. They seemed fully alive and intelligent. His lips moved and Bunch bent forward to catch the words, or rather the word. It was only one word that he said. "Sanctuary."

There was, she thought, just a very faint smile as he breathed out this word. There was no mistaking it, for after a moment he said it again.

"Sanctuary." Then, with a faint sigh, he closed his eyes. Once more Bunch's fingers went to his pulse. It was fainter now and more intermittent. She got up with decision.

"Don't move," she said, "or try to move. I'm going for help."

The man's eyes opened again, but he seemed now to be fixing his attention on the coloured light that came through the east window. He murmured something that Bunch could not quite catch. She thought, startled, that it might have been her husband's name.

"Julian?" she said. "Did you come here to find Julian?"

But there was no answer. The man lay with eyes closed, his breathing coming in slow, shallow fashion.

Bunch turned and left the church rapidly. She glanced at her watch and nodded with some satisfaction. Dr. Griffiths would still be in his surgery. It was only a couple of minutes'

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walk from the church. She went in, without waiting to knock or ring, passing through the waiting-room and into the doctor's surgery.

"You must come at once," said Bunch breathlessly. "There's a man dying in the church."

Some minutes later, Dr. Griffiths rose from his knees after a brief examination.

"Can we move him from here into the Vicarage? I can attend to him better there—not that it's any use."

"Of course," said Bunch. "I'll go and get things ready. I'll get Harper and Jones, shall I? To help you carry him."

"Thanks. I can telephone from the Vicarage for an ambulance, but I'm afraid—by the time it comes . . ."

Bunch said, "Internal bleeding?"

Dr. Griffiths nodded. "How on earth did he come here?"

It was about five minutes later when Dr. Griffiths put down the telephone receiver and came back into the morning-room where the injured man was lying on quickly arranged blankets on the sofa. Bunch was moving a basin of water and clearing up after the doctor's examination.

"Well, that's that," said Griffiths. "I've sent for an ambulance and I've notified the police." He stood, frowning, looking down on the patient who lay with closed eyes. His left hand was plucking in a nervous, spasmodic way at his side.

"He was shot," said Griffiths. "Shot at fairly close quarters. He rolled up his handkerchief into a ball and plugged the wound with it to stop the bleeding."

"Could he have gone far after that happened?" Bunch asked.

"Oh yes, it's quite possible. A mortally-wounded man has been known to pick himself up and walk along a street as though nothing had happened, and then suddenly collapse five or ten minutes later. So he needn't have been shot in the church. Oh no. He may have been shot some distance away. Of course, he may have shot himself and then dropped the revolver and staggered blindly towards the church. I don't quite know why he made for the church and not for the Vicarage."

"Oh, I know that," said Bunch. "He said, 'Sanctuary.'"

The doctor stared at her. "Sanctuary?"

"Here's Julian," said Bunch, turning her head as she heard her husband's steps in the hall.

The Reverend Julian Harmon entered the room. His vague, scholarly manner always made him appear much older than he was.

"Dear me!" said Julian Harmon, gazing in a mild, puzzled

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manner at the surgical appliances and the prone figure on the sofa.

Bunch explained with her usual economy of words. "Do you know him, Julian? I thought he said your name."

The Vicar came up to the sofa and looked down at the dying man. "Poor fellow," he said, and shook his head. "No, I don't know him. I'm almost sure I've never seen him before."

At that moment the dying man's eyes opened once more. They went from the doctor to Julian Harmon, and from him to his wife. The eyes stayed there, staring into Bunch's face.

Dr. Griffiths stepped forward. "If you could tell us," he said urgently.

But with his eyes fixed on Bunch, the man said in a weak voice, "Please—please—"

And then, with a slight tremor, he died.

Sergeant Hayes licked his pencil and turned the page of his notebook. "So that's all you can tell me, Mrs. Harmon?"

"That's all," said Bunch. "These are the things out of his coat pockets."

On a table at Sergeant Hayes' elbow was a wallet, a rather battered old watch with the initials *W.S.*, and the return half of a ticket to London.

"You've found out who he is?" asked Bunch.

"A Mr. and Mrs. Eccles phoned up the police station. He's her brother, it seems. Name of Sandbourn. Been in a low state of health and nerves for some time. Depression. Recently come back from abroad, I understand. He's been getting worse lately. The day before yesterday he walked out and didn't come back. He took a revolver with him."

"And he came out here and shot himself with it?" said Bunch. "Why?"

"Well, you see, he'd been depressed—"

Bunch interrupted him. "I don't mean that. I mean, why here?"

Since Sergeant Hayes obviously did not know the answer to that one, he replied in an oblique fashion. "Come out here, he did, on the bus."

"Yes," said Bunch again. "But, why?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Harmon," said Sergeant Hayes. "There's no accounting. If the balance of the mind is disturbed . . ."

Bunch finished for him. "They may do it anywhere. But it still seems to me unnecessary to take a bus to a small country place like this. He didn't know anyone here, did he?"

"Not so far as can be ascertained," said Sergeant Hayes. He

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coughed in an apologetic manner and said, as he rose to his feet, "It may be as Mr. and Mrs. Eccles will come out and see you, ma'am—if you don't mind, that is."

"Of course, I don't mind," said Bunch. "I wish I had something to tell them."

"I'll be getting along," said Sergeant Hayes.

"I'm only so thankful," said Bunch, going with him to the front door, "that it wasn't murder."

A car was drawing up at the Vicarage gate.

Sergeant Hayes, glancing at it, remarked, "Looks as though that's Mr. and Mrs. Eccles come here now."

Bunch braced herself to endure what, she felt, might be rather a difficult ordeal. Anyway, she thought, I can always call Julian in to help me.

Exactly what she had expected Mr. and Mrs. Eccles to be like Bunch could not have said, but she was conscious, as she greeted them, of a feeling of surprise.

Mr. Eccles was a stout and florid man whose natural manner would have been cheerful and facetious.

Mrs. Eccles had a vaguely flashy look about her. She had a small, mean, pursed-up mouth. Her voice was thin and reedy. "It's been a terrible shock, Mrs. Harmon, as you can imagine," she said.

"Oh, I know," said Bunch. "It must have been. Do sit down. Can I offer you—well, perhaps it's a little early for tea—"

Mr. Eccles waved a podgy hand, "No, no, nothing for us," he said. "It's very kind of you, I'm sure. Just wanted to—well—what poor William said and all that, you know."

"He'd been abroad a long time," said Mrs. Eccles, "and I think he must have had some nasty experiences. Very quiet and depressed he's been, ever since he came home. Said the world wasn't fit to live in and there was nothing to look forward to. Poor Bill, he was always moody."

Bunch stared at them both for a moment or two without speaking.

"Pinched my husband's revolver, he did," went on Mrs. Eccles. "Without our knowing. Then it seems he come out here by bus. I suppose that was nice feeling on his part. He wouldn't have liked to do it in our house."

"Poor fellow, poor fellow," said Mr. Eccles, with a sigh. "It doesn't do to judge."

There was another short pause, and Mr. Eccles said, "Did he leave a message? Any last words, or anything like that?"

His bright, rather pig-like eyes watched Bunch closely. Mrs.

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Eccles, too, leaned forward as though anxious for the reply.

"No," said Bunch quietly. "He came into the church when he was dying, for sanctuary."

Mrs. Eccles said in a puzzled voice, "Sanctuary? I don't quite . . ."

Mr. Eccles interrupted impatiently. "Holy place, my dear. That's what the Vicar's wife means. It's a sin—suicide, you know. I expect he wanted to make amends."

"He tried to say something just before he died," said Bunch. "He began, 'Please,' but that's as far as he got."

Mrs. Eccles put her handkerchief to her eyes and sniffed. "Oh, dear," she said. "It's terribly upsetting, isn't it?"

"There, there, Pam," said her husband. "Don't take on. These things can't be helped. Poor Willie. Still, he's at peace now. Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Harmon. I hope we haven't interrupted you."

They shook hands with her. Then Eccles turned back suddenly to say, "Oh yes, there's just one other thing. I think you've got his coat here, haven't you?"

"His coat?" Bunch frowned.

Mrs. Eccles said, "We'd like to have his things. Sentimental like."

"He had a watch and a wallet and a railway ticket in the pockets," said Bunch. "I gave them to Sergeant Hayes."

"That's all right, then," said Mr. Eccles. "He'll hand them over to us, I expect. His private papers would be in the wallet."

"There was a pound note in the wallet," said Bunch. "Nothing else."

"No letters? Nothing like that?"

Bunch shook her head.

"Well, thank you again, Mrs. Harmon. The coat he was wearing—is that at the station? Perhaps the sergeant's got that, too, has he?"

Bunch frowned in an effort of remembrance. "No," she said. "I don't think . . . let me see. The doctor and I took his coat off to examine his wound." She looked round the room vaguely. "I must have taken it upstairs with the towels and basin."

"I wonder now, Mrs. Harmon, if you don't mind . . . We'd like his coat, you know, the last thing he wore. The wife feels rather sentimental about it."

"Of course," said Bunch. "Would you like me to have it cleaned first? I'm afraid it's rather—well—stained."

"Oh no, no, no, that doesn't matter."

"I wonder where . . . Excuse me a moment."

Bunch went upstairs, and it was some few minutes before she

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returned. " I'm sorry," she said breathlessly, " my daily woman must have put it aside with other clothes that were going to the cleaners. It's taken me quite a long time to find it. Here it is. I'll do it up for you in brown paper."

Disclaiming their protests, she did so, then once more effusively bidding her farewell, they departed.

Bunch went slowly back across the hall and entered the study. The Reverend Julian Harmon looked up and his brow cleared. He was writing a sermon and was fearing that he'd been led astray by the interest of the political relations between Judaea and Persia, in the reign of Cyrus.

" Yes, dear? " he said hopefully.

" Julian," said Bunch, " what's sanctuary exactly? "

Julian Harmon gratefully put aside his sermon paper. " Well," he said, " sanctuary in Roman and Greek temples applied to the cella in which stood the statue of the god. The Latin word for altar, ara, also means protection. In A.D. 399 the right of sanctuary in Christian churches was finally and definitively recognised. Criminals and refugees have taken advantage of the right of sanctuary since very early times. In the Bible, you may remember, Joab is mentioned as laying hold of the altar. The earliest mention of the right of sanctuary in England is in A.D. 600, in the code of laws issued by Ethelbert—"

He was, as often, disconcerted by his wife's reception of his erudite pronouncement. " Darling," she said. " You are sweet."

Bending over, she kissed him on the tip of his nose.

" The Eccles have been here," said Bunch.

The Vicar frowned. " The Eccles? I don't seem to remember . . ."

" You couldn't remember," said Bunch. " You don't know them. They're the sister and brother-in-law of the man in the church."

" My dear, you ought to have called me."

" It wasn't necessary," said Bunch. " They were not in need of consolation. I wonder now." She frowned. " If I put a casserole in the oven tomorrow, can you manage, Julian? I think I shall have to go up to London. There's a special white sale at Burrows and Portman's. Besides," she added thoughtfully, " I think I ought to go and see Aunt Jane."

That sweet old lady, Miss Jane Marple, was enjoying the delights of the metropolis for a fortnight, comfortably installed in her nephew's studio flat.

" So kind of dear Raymond," she murmured. " He and Joan have gone to America for a fortnight, and they insisted I should

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come up here and enjoy myself. I so seldom get the chance of staying in London. And now, dear Bunch, do tell me what is worrying you."

Bunch was Miss Marple's favourite godchild, and the old lady looked at her with great affection as Bunch, thrusting her best felt hat farther on the back of her head, started on her story.

The recital was concise and clear. Miss Marple nodded her head. "I see," she said. "Yes, I see."

"That's why I felt I had to talk to you," said Bunch. "I don't really know what I ought to do. I can't ask Julian because—well, I mean, Julian's full of rectitude . . ."

This statement appeared to be perfectly understood by Miss Marple, who said, "I know what you mean, dear. We women—well, it's different." She went on, "You told me what happened, Bunch, but I'd like to know first exactly what you think."

"It's all wrong," said Bunch. "The man who was there in the church, dying, knew all about sanctuary. He said it just the way Julian would have said it. I mean he was a well-read, educated man. And if he'd shot himself, he wouldn't drag himself into a church afterwards and say, 'Sanctuary.' Sanctuary means that you're pursued, and when you get into a church you're safe. Your pursuers can't touch you. At one time even the law couldn't get at you." She looked questioningly at Miss Marple, who nodded.

Bunch went on, "Those people, the Eccles, were quite different. Ignorant and coarse. And there's another thing. That watch—the dead man's watch. It had the initials *W.S.* on the back of it. But inside—I opened it—in very small lettering there was, *To Walter from his father*, and a date. Walter! The Eccles kept talking of him as William or Bill."

Miss Marple seemed about to speak, but Bunch rushed on, "I know you're not always called the name you're baptised by. I mean, I can understand that you might be christened William and called Porky, or Carrots, or something. But your sister wouldn't call you William or Bill if your name was Walter."

"You mean that she wasn't his sister?"

"I'm quite sure she wasn't his sister. They were horrid—both of them. They came to the Vicarage to get his things and to find out if he'd said anything before he died. When I said he hadn't, I saw it in their faces—relief. I think, myself," finished Bunch, "it was Eccles who shot him."

"Murder?" said Miss Marple.

"Yes," said Bunch. "Murder. That's why I came to you, darling."

Such a remark might have seemed incongruous to an ignorant

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listener, but in certain spheres Miss Marple had a reputation for dealing with murder.

"He said 'Please' to me before he died," said Bunch. "He wanted me to do something for him. The awful thing is I've no idea what."

Miss Marple considered for a moment or two, and then pounced on the point that had already occurred to Bunch. "But why was he there at all?" she asked.

"You mean," said Bunch, "if you wanted sanctuary you might pop into a church anywhere. There's no need to take a bus that only goes four times a day and come out to a lonely spot like ours for it."

"He must have come there for a purpose," Miss Marple said. "He must have come to see someone. Chipping Cleghorn's not a big place, Bunch. Surely you must have some idea of who it was he came to see?"

Bunch reviewed the inhabitants of the village in her mind before rather doubtfully shaking her head. "In a way," she said, "it could be anybody."

"He never mentioned a name?"

"He said Julian, or I thought he said Julian. It might have been Julia, I suppose. As far as I know, there isn't any Julia living in Chipping Cleghorn."

She screwed up her eyes as she thought back to the scene. The man lying there on the chancel steps, the light coming through the window with its jewels of red and blue.

"Jewels," said Bunch suddenly. "Perhaps that's what he said. The light coming through the east window looked like jewels."

"Jewels," said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

"I'm coming now," said Bunch, "to the most important thing of all. The reason really why I've come here today. You see, the Eccles made a great fuss about having his coat. We took it off when the doctor was seeing to him. It was an old, shabby sort of coat—there was no reason they should have wanted it. I mean, they didn't look poor or as though a suit would mean anything much to them. They pretended it had a sentimental value, but that was nonsense.

"Anyway, I went to find it, and as I was going up the stairs I remembered how he'd made a kind of picking gesture with his hand, as though he was fumbling with the coat.

"So when I got hold of the coat I looked at it very carefully and I saw that in one place the lining had been sewn up again with a different thread. Sewn up rather clumsily, as a man would sew it. I unpicked it and found a little piece of paper

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inside. I took it out and sewed it up again properly with thread that matched.

" I was careful, and I don't really think that the Eccles would know I'd done it. I don't think so, but I can't be sure. And I took the coat down to them and made some excuse for the delay."

" The piece of paper? " asked Miss Marple.

Bunch opened her handbag. " I didn't show it to Julian," she said, " because he would have said that I ought to have given it to the Eccles. But I thought I'd rather bring it to you instead."

She handed the small docket across to Miss Marple.

" A cloakroom ticket," said Miss Marple, looking at it. " Paddington station."

" He had a return ticket to Paddington in his pocket," said Bunch.

The eyes of the two women met.

" This calls for action," said Miss Marple briskly. " But it would be advisable, I think, to be careful. Would you have noticed at all, Bunch dear, whether you were followed when you came to London today? "

" Followed! " exclaimed Bunch. " You don't think—? "

" Well, I think it's possible," said Miss Marple. " When anything is possible, I think we ought to take precautions." She rose with a brisk movement.

" You came up here ostensibly, my dear, to go to the sales. I think the right thing to do, therefore, would be for us to go to the sales. But before we set out, we might put one or two little arrangements in hand. I don't suppose," Miss Marple added obscurely, " that I shall need the old speckled tweed with the beaver collar just at present."

It was about an hour and a half later that the two ladies, rather the worse for wear and battered in appearance, their hair slightly dishevelled, their hats askew, and both clasping parcels of hard-won household linen, sat down at a small and sequestered restaurant, called The Apple Bough, to restore their forces with steak-and-kidney pudding followed by apple tart and custard.

A smart young woman, with a lavish application of rouge and lipstick, entered The Apple Bough. After looking round vaguely for a moment or two, she hurried to their table. She laid down an envelope by Miss Marple's elbow.

" There you are, miss," she said briskly.

" Oh, thank you, Gladys," said Miss Marple. " Thank you very much. So kind of you."

" Always pleased to oblige, I'm sure," said Gladys. " Ernie always says to me, ' Everything what's good you learnt from that

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Miss Marple of yours that you were in service with. Trained you proper,' he says, 'and don't you forget it,' and I'm sure I'm always glad to oblige you, miss."

"Such a dear girl," said Miss Marple as Gladys departed again. "Always so willing and so kind. One wishes sometimes that they wouldn't wear so much lipstick—but I dare say it gives them self-confidence."

She looked inside the envelope and then passed it on to Bunch. "Now be very careful, dear," she said. "By the way, is there still that nice young Inspector at Melchester that I remember?"

"I don't know," said Bunch. "I expect so."

"Well, if not," said Miss Marple thoughtfully, "I can always ring up the Chief Constable. I think he would remember me."

"Of course he'd remember you," said Bunch. "Everybody would remember you. You're unique." She rose. "Well, I'd better hurry along or I shall miss the train."

Arrived at Paddington, Bunch went to the Left Luggage Office and produced the cloakroom ticket. A moment or two later a rather shabby old suitcase was passed across to her, and carrying this she made her way to the platform where her train was already in.

The journey home was uneventful. Bunch got out of the train and made her way towards the exit, carrying her suitcase. She had nearly reached the doorway when a man, sprinting along the platform, suddenly seized the suitcase from her hand and rushed off with it.

"Stop!" Bunch yelled. "Stop him, stop him. He's taken my suitcase."

The ticket collector who, at this rural station, was a man of somewhat slow processes, had just begun to say, "Now, look here, you can't do that—" when a smart blow in the chest pushed him aside and the man with the suitcase rushed out from the station. He made his way to where a car was waiting.

Tossing the suitcase in, he was about to climb after it when out of the darkness a hand fell on his shoulder, and the voice of Police Constable Abel said, "Now then, what's all this?"

Bunch arrived, panting, out of the darkness. "He snatched my suitcase," she said.

"Nonsense," said the man. "I don't know what this lady means. It's my suitcase. I just got out of the train with it."

"Now, let's get this clear," said Police Constable Abel. He looked at Bunch with a bovine and impartial stare. Nobody would have guessed that Abel and Mrs. Harmon spent long half-hours in his off-time discussing the respective merits of

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manure and bone meal for rose bushes. " You say, madam, that this is your suitcase? " said Police Constable Abel.

" Yes," said Bunch. " Definitely."

" And you, sir? "

" I say this suitcase is mine."

The man was tall, dark, and well dressed, with a drawling voice and a superior manner. A feminine voice from inside the car said, " Of course it's your suitcase, Edwin. I don't know what this woman means."

" We'll have to get this clear," said Police Constable Abel. " If it's your suitcase, madam, what do you say is inside it? "

" Clothes," said Bunch. " A long, speckled coat with a beaver collar, two wool jumpers, and a pair of shoes."

" Well, that's clear enough." He turned to the other.

" I am a theatrical costumier," said the dark man importantly. " This suitcase contains properties which I brought down here for an amateur theatrical performance."

" Right, sir," said Police Constable Abel. " Well, we'll just look inside, shall we, and see? We can go along to the police station, or if you're in a hurry we'll take the suitcase back to the railway station and open it there."

" It'll suit me," said the dark man. " My name is Moss, by the way. Edwin Moss."

Police Constable Abel, holding the suitcase, went back into the station. " Just taking this into the Parcels Office, George," he said to the ticket collector.

" Oh, ay," said the latter.

Police Constable Abel laid the suitcase on the counter of the Parcels Office and pushed back the clasp. The case was not locked.

Bunch and Mr. Edwin Moss stood on either side of him, glaring at each other.

" Ah! " said Abel, as he pushed up the lid.

Inside, neatly folded, was a long, rather shabby tweed coat with a beaver fur collar. There were also two woollen jumpers and a pair of country shoes.

" Exactly as you say, madam," said Police Constable Abel, turning to Bunch.

Nobody could have said that Mr. Edwin Moss underdid things. His dismay and compunction were magnificent.

" I do apologise," he said. " I really do apologise. I must somehow or other have left my own suitcase on the train. Please believe me, dear lady, when I tell you how very, very sorry I am. Unpardonable—quite unpardonable—my behaviour has been." He looked at his watch. " I must rush now. Probably my

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suitcase has gone on in the train. What the company will say to me for having mislaid their properties! I shall have to see what can be done."

Raising his hat once more, he said meltingly to Bunch, "Do, do forgive me," and rushed hurriedly out of the Parcels Office.

"Are you going to let him get away?" asked Bunch in a conspiratorial whisper of Police Constable Abel.

The latter slowly closed a bovine eye in a wink. "He won't get too far, ma'am," he said. "That's to say, he won't get far unobserved, if you take my meaning."

"Oh," said Bunch, relieved.

"That old lady's been on the phone," said Police Constable Abel, "the one as was down here a few years ago. Bright, she is, isn't she? Sharp as a needle. But there's been a lot cooking up all today. Shouldn't wonder if the Inspector or Sergeant was out to see you about it tomorrow morning."

It was the Inspector who came, the Inspector Craddock whom Miss Marple remembered. He looked rather older and more careworn than when Bunch had seen him last, but he greeted her with a smile as an old friend.

"Crime in Chipping Cleghorn again," he said cheerfully. "You don't lack sensation here, do you, Mrs. Harmon?"

"I could do with rather less," said Bunch. "Have you come to ask me questions, or are you going to tell me things for a change?"

"I'll tell you some things first," said the Inspector. "To begin with, Mr. and Mrs. Eccles have been having an eye kept on them for some time. There's reason to believe that they've been connected with several robberies in this part of the world.

"For another thing, although Mrs. Eccles has a brother called Sandbourn who has recently come back from abroad, the man whom you found dying on the chancel steps was definitely not Sandbourn."

"I knew he wasn't," said Bunch. "His name was Walter, to begin with, not William."

The Inspector nodded. "Yes," he said, "they slipped up there."

"Who was he really?"

"His name was Walter St. John Stevens, and he escaped some days ago from Charrington Prison."

"Of course," said Bunch softly to herself, "he was being hunted down by the law, and he took sanctuary." Then she asked, "What had he done?"

"I'll have to go back rather a long way. It's a complicated story. Several years ago there was a certain dancer doing turns

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on the music halls. I don't expect you'll have ever heard of her, but she specialised in an Arabian Nights turn. She wore bits of rhinestone and not much else and called the turn Aladdin in the Cave of Jewels. She wasn't much of a dancer, I believe, but she was—well—attractive. Anyway, a certain Asiatic royalty fell for her in a big way. Among other things, he gave her a magnificent emerald necklace."

"The historic jewels of a raja?" murmured Bunch.

Inspector Craddock coughed. "Well, a rather more modern version, Mrs. Harmon. The necklace came from Cartier's. The affair didn't last very long; it broke up when our potentate's attention was captured by a certain film star whose demands were not quite so modest.

"She demanded marriage, a settlement, and considerable alimony. But none of that is our business.

"Zobeida, to give her her stage name, hung on to the necklace, and in due course it was stolen. It disappeared from her dressing-room at the theatre and there was a lingering suspicion in the minds of the authorities that she herself might have engineered its disappearance. Such things have been known as a publicity stunt, or indeed from more dishonest motives. The necklace was never recovered, but during the course of the investigation the attention of the police was drawn to this man, Walter St. John Stevens.

"He was a man of education and breeding who had come down in the world, and who was employed as a working jeweller with a rather obscure firm which was suspected of acting as a fence for jewel robberies. There was evidence that this necklace had passed through his hands, and indeed the actual setting of the jewels was found, so it looked as though he'd abstracted the emeralds and disposed of them.

"It was, however, in connection with the theft of some other jewellery that he was finally brought to trial and convicted and sent to prison. He had earned remission for good conduct in prison and had not very much longer to serve, so his escape was rather a surprise."

"But why did he come here?" asked Bunch.

"We'd like to know that very much, Mrs. Harmon. Following up his trail, it seems that he went first to London. He didn't see any of his old associates, but he visited an elderly woman, a Mrs. Jacobs, who had formerly been a theatrical dresser. She won't say a word of what he came for but, according to other lodgers in the house, he left carrying a suitcase."

"I see," said Bunch. "He left it in the cloakroom at Paddington and then he came down here."

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"By that time," said Inspector Craddock, "Eccles and the man who calls himself Edwin Moss were on his trail. They wanted that suitcase. They saw him get on the bus. They must have driven out in a car ahead of him, and been waiting for him when he left the bus."

"And he was murdered?" said Bunch.

"Yes," said Craddock. "He was shot. It was Eccles' revolver, but I rather fancy it was Moss who did the shooting. Now, Mrs. Harmon, what we want to know is, where is the suitcase that Walter Stevens actually deposited at Paddington station?"

Bunch grinned. "I expect Aunt Jane's got it by now," she said. "Miss Marple, I mean. That was her plan. She sent a former maid of hers with a suitcase packed with her things to the cloakroom at Paddington. We exchanged tickets, and I collected her suitcase and brought it down by train. She seemed to expect that an attempt would be made to get it from me."

It was Inspector Craddock's turn to smile. "So she said when she rang up," he said.

"I'm driving up to London to see her. Do you want to come too, Mrs. Harmon?"

"We—ell," said Bunch, considering. "We—ell, as a matter of fact, it's very fortunate. I had toothache last night, so I really ought to go to London to see the dentist, oughtn't I?"

"Definitely," said Inspector Craddock.

Miss Marple looked from Inspector Craddock's face to the eager face of Bunch Harmon. The suitcase lay on the table.

"Of course I haven't opened it," the old lady said. "I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing till somebody official arrived. Besides," she added, with a demurely mischievous Victorian smile, "it's locked."

"Like to make a guess at what's inside, Miss Marple?" asked the Inspector.

"I should imagine, you know," said Miss Marple, "that it would be Zobeida's theatrical costumes. Would you like a chisel, Inspector?"

The chisel soon did its work. Both women gave a slight gasp as the lid flew up. The sunlight coming through the window lit up what seemed like an inexhaustible treasure of sparkling jewels, red, blue, green, orange.

"Aladdin's Cave," said Miss Marple. "The flashing jewels the girl wore to dance."

"Ah," said Inspector Craddock. "Now, what's so precious about it, do you think, that a man was murdered to get hold of it?"

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" She was a shrewd girl, I expect," said Miss Marple thoughtfully. " She's dead, isn't she, Inspector? "

" Yes, died three years ago."

" She had this valuable emerald necklace," said Miss Marple musingly. " Had the stones taken out of their setting and fastened here and there on her theatrical costume, where everyone would take them merely for coloured rhinestones. Then she had a replica made of the Cartier necklace, and that of course was what was stolen. No wonder it never came on the market. The thief soon discovered the stones were false."

" Here is an envelope," said Bunch, pulling aside some of the glittering stones.

Inspector Craddock took it from her and extracted two official-looking papers. He read aloud: *Marriage certificate between Walter Edmund St. John Stevens and Mary Moss.* That was Zobeida's real name."

" So they were married," said Miss Marple. " I see."

" What's the other? " asked Bunch.

" A birth certificate of a daughter, Jewel."

" Jewel? " cried Bunch. " Why, of course. Jewel! Jill! That's it. I see now why he came to Chipping Cleghorn. That's what he was trying to say to me. Jewel. Mrs. Mundy, you know. Laburnum Cottage. She looks after a little girl for someone. She's devoted to her. She's been like her own grand-daughter. Yes, I remember now, her name was Jewel, only of course they never call her anything but Jill.

" Mrs. Mundy had a stroke about a week ago. I've been trying hard to find a good home for Jill. I didn't want her taken away to an institution. Her father must have heard about it in prison and managed to break away and get hold of this suitcase from the old dresser he or his wife left it with. I suppose if the jewels really belonged to her mother, they can be used for the child now."

" I should imagine so, Mrs. Harmon. *If* they're here."

" Oh, they'll be here all right," said Miss Marple cheerfully.

" Thank goodness you're back, dear," said the Reverend Julian Harmon, greeting his wife with affection and a sigh of content. " Mrs. Burt really gave me some very peculiar fish-cakes for lunch. I didn't want to hurt her feelings so I gave them to Tiglath Pileser, but even he wouldn't eat them, so I'm afraid I had to throw them out of the window."

" Tiglath Pileser," said Bunch, stroking the cat, " is very particular about what fish he eats. I often tell him he's got a proud stomach."

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"And your tooth, dear?" asked her husband. "Did you have it seen to?"

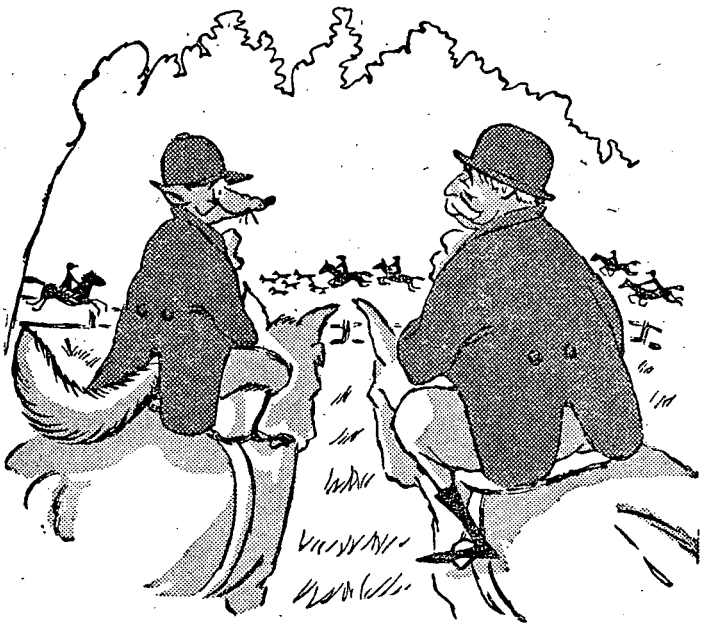
"Yes," said Bunch. "It didn't hurt much, and I went to see Aunt Jane, too."

"Dear old thing," said Julian Harmon, "I hope she's not failing at all."

"Not in the least," said Bunch with a slight grin.

The following morning Bunch took a fresh supply of chrysanthemums to the church. The sun was once more pouring through the east window and Bunch stood in the jewelled light on the chancel steps. She said very softly under her breath, "Your little girl will be all right. I'll see that she is, I promise."

Then she tidied up the church, slipped into a pew, and knelt for a few moments to say her prayers before returning to the Vicarage to attack the accumulated dust of two neglected days.



"We must be ever alert, my boy! This fox we're after is as clever as they come."

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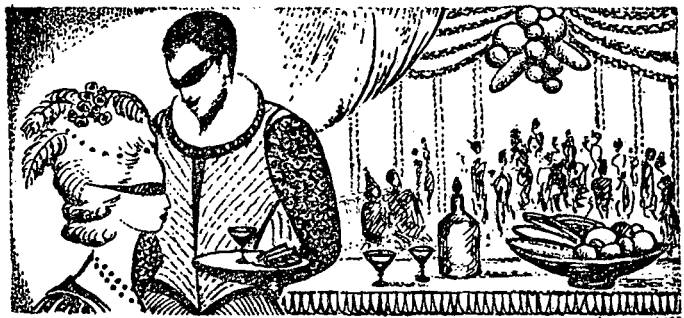

PARTY LINE

I'm mightily fond of a party.
When summoned to sup or to dine
Or join in some merriment hearty,
I practically never decline.

PHYLLIS MCGINLEY

Dancing Round the Tree

Maria curtseyed, and waited on us with her dishes of sweets and nuts. It was all very stiff; I could think of nothing but the dance which was to come. During " O Come, All Ye Faithful " —the other side of the record—Maria changed into her starry frock, and she swept on with a little tree in her hands, which she placed gracefully in the middle of the carpet. It was made of painted paper and picture-wire, and scattered with stars left over from the frock . . . Maria began to dance round her tree.

I shall never know what she thought her dance meant. And I shall never understand what Madame really thought about Maria and her dancing, because afterwards she did not speak of it. But I know that while Maria was dancing a sort of miracle happened in that dark dining-room . . . She scattered invisible presents from her moving hands. Her clinging arms embraced the air, joy and love came into the room with her dancing.

DEBORAH NEWTON, *The Holly and the Ivy*

Oh come with thy Christmas vagaries,
Thy harlequin pantomime jumps,
Grim ogres and beautiful fairies,
In gossamer trousers and pumps!

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Come hither with fun and with folly,
Bring icicle gems on thy brow,
The bright coral beads of the holly,
And pearls from the mistletoe bough.

Oh come with thy shining apparel,
Thy robe like the snow on the hill;
And come above all, with a barrel
Of something to take off the chill!

THOMAS HAYNES BAYLY

Pencil and Paper

I was at a party the other night where, to the dismay of all concerned, the hostess suddenly whipped out pencils and bits of paper and announced through the hubbub that we were going to play ever such an interesting guessing game. I won't explain the details, because I didn't grasp them properly; but the gist of it was that you each had a letter in turn and had to start talking and go on talking, pretending to be someone famous whose name began with that letter. My letter was T, and I rather smugly chose a well-known Greek mathematician of the first or second century A.D. This foxed everybody, and the party broke up at around three in the morning in complete disorder. Among the foxed were, of all people, Sir Laurence and Lady Olivier, and they very kindly gave me a lift home. We were just driving away when Lady Olivier said to me in what seemed rather a chilly voice, "And just whom were you supposed to be doing?"

"Ptolemy," I said.

"He begins with a P," said Lady Olivier, "and but for you, we should have been home and in our beds two hours ago."

ALAN MELVILLE, *Myself When Young*

The guest that hostesses
Try to abide
Opens the sandwiches
To peek inside.

A. A. LATTIMER

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Honour Your Partners

He admired her ingenuous grace while she danced the figure for which a partner came to lead her out; as soon as she came back breathless to sit down, another dancer wanted her to start again—tired and panting she was on the point of refusing, but she could not resist; she flew off, with a smile for Prince Andrew on her lips. "I would rather stay with you," that smile said, "for I am quite tired, but I cannot help it—I am carried off, and I am so glad, so glad! —Oh! I love everyone this evening—and you understand me, don't you?" How much that smile said!

LEO TOLSTOY, *War and Peace*

Catching Crabs

They pile the Yule-log on the hearth—
Soak toasted crabs in ale;
And while they sip, their homely mirth
Is joyous, as if all the earth
For man were void of bale!

THOMAS COOPER, THE CHARTIST,
The Baron's Yule Feast, 1845

End of a Good Party

M. Salter was the Star of the dancing, as she does Ballet, but I thought: Lisa, it is fair she should be the Star, as it is her birthday. But the Slow Dance they were doing was spoilt suddenly by a Fearful Screech from supper room. We all rushed in as though to see a fire starting. It was the maid who had Screeched and she was still doing it and pointing at table. We looked and there was my evening bag which I had left behind. The bag was moving about among the crackers. I said to myself: Lisa, now you are Sunk, as Snowy has woken up and trying to find some Fresh Air.

Everybody was saying: Whoever does the bag belong to? At this, I felt a Wicked Lie coming over me, as ashamed to tell I had a mouse in my evening bag. But I was even more ashamed to tell a Lie in front of Party. So I said to myself: Lisa, it has been a good party and nearly over now and better to be Looked Down on over mouse than over Lie.

So I stepped out from the rest and said: It is my bag. There is a mouse in it wanting some air, so I will let it out.

SYBIL BURR, *Life With Lisa*

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DJINN CON GIN

It was old, dark green glass—
a hand-blown job

BY CHRISTOPHER LANDON

WHEN I opened the door at half past ten, the clouds were scurrying low from the south-west over the marsh and towards Rye, lowering, black and heavy, full of rain. I thought bitterly of the driving curtain that would sweep across to blot out the daisy pattern of sheep against the green between the dykes; of the cars that would race by in their showers of spray, not bothering to stop, intent on reaching the comforts of Folkestone. Another day to be written off—in the worst season we had had since we took over the pub.

There was nothing to do about it, except hope. The village, who gave us our bread and butter, would not be in till the evening; but the jam, the casual trade with their quick rounds of short drinks, would skate by as usual. I made up the spirit book, sorted a few empties, and sat down to read the paper.

It was exactly eleven—I remember glancing up at the old clock that ticked in the corner, the one we always kept ten minutes fast—when I heard the crunch of feet on the gravel of the pull-in, and a little man walked into the bar.

He was very small, almost a dwarf, and he was wearing a hat that was too big for him. I don't mean it didn't fit; but the brim was too broad, the crown too high for someone of his stature. He seemed to be growing under it like the stalk of a mushroom. In that first moment, he reminded me of a gnome.

Traveller, I thought, as he put a battered attaché case on the counter. Mats, glass, peanuts, detergents, and I don't want any. But he didn't start off with the usual sales talk. He just looked me straight in the face, with clear green eyes, and said, "Good morning, landlord. Can I have a glass of water?"

That left only one possibility: he was a barman, looking for a job. Somehow, I wished there was one to give him, that there was enough work for us, myself and Mary, my wife, whom I could hear singing upstairs as she made the bed. If he did bring up the subject, I should have liked to be able to say yes. But it was no use.

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I poured a glass of water from the sink, and gave it to him without a word. He had climbed on to a bar stool, and sat there, sipping thoughtfully. "Spring water, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "We've a well in the garden."

"Ah, that makes it all the better. I hoped it would be that."

I waited for him to make a statement, but after another sip, he asked more questions.

"How's trade?"

"Not too bad."

"Not much at this time of day? A bit lonely, eh?"

"We pick up in the evening."

"The village, you mean? Only beer and darts. Not much joy in that."

"We manage." I was looking down at the piece of rubber hose I kept under the counter. There was only the five-pound float in the till, and he was so small and frail that there couldn't be any trouble, but these quick grabs had been tried before.

"Did a mate of mine come in here just after opening-time? Name of Hoskins? Bit of a squint, and a harelip?"

"No," I said. Apart from the fact that an accomplice made things worse, the instinct of a good landlord forbade any mention of another customer's coming and going.

"Very good, very good." He had pulled out a little notebook and was flipping over the pages. "John Little, The Plough; permitted hours, 10-30 to 2, and 6 to 10, for the sale of wines and spirits?"

"That's me," I said. "Where did you get it from? Over the door?"

"No, I made inquiries. And you've a good trade when the weather is right. You're kind: you gave me this glass of water without a grumble. You don't talk: you see that friend of mine, I asked about, doesn't exist. Just right for what I want. Now—"

"Now?" As I echoed the word, I stopped looking down in the direction of that piece of hose. I was wondering how I could get into the office and use the phone. I was dealing with a lunatic.

"Now," said the little man, snapping back the catches of his case, "I'm going to make your fortune."

Very slowly, very carefully, he unwrapped something from the folds of a white silk handkerchief that was so old it had stained to a fine yellow. Standing on the counter in front of me was a bottle, about a quarter size, but of the most peculiar shape and colour I had ever seen.

"Don't drop it," said the man. "It's worth about five hundred pounds to you, if you're smart."

In some odd way, I believed him. I picked it up very carefully,

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turned it round slowly in my hands. It was older, by far, than its wrapping had been; of dark green glass; not round, not oval, not square in shape, but a combination of all three; not even upright on its base, but crooked, a hand-blown job. One thing was incongruous: instead of the finely-sealed cork that should have protruded from the neck, there was the insult of one of those chrome shaker-tops that you see on bitters bottles.

"Got an empty whisky bottle?" said the little man in a matter-of-fact tone. "A clear one would be best, to see what I'm about."

I had to humour him, so I reached down to the empties, stacked on their sides to catch the last of the drips, and lifted one up to the counter.

"Now, watch carefully."

He took the protective stopper off the end of the shaker, then flicked one drop of a black, tarry-looking liquid into the bottom of my bottle. "Now fill it to the top with your excellent well-water. Just a second, though—" He broke off, walked to the open door, and peered in each direction down the road. "No one about," he said, "carry on and then put it down gently."

I did as I was told, and then the most extraordinary thing happened.

Do you remember those Japanese flowers we used to buy for a penny when we were kids, and put in a glass of water? Do you remember how they grew? Just the same thing happened here, except that it was from that dark blob in the bottom of the bottle. It seemed to writhe as it threw out tendrils that crept to the neck. They were dark at first, but faded from brown to gold as they grew longer. At the same time, the water began to change colour, to straw, then to a deep amber.

"Taste it," said the man.

I tipped a little into a glass, and took a sip. Then I took another. "But it's Scotch, good Scotch!" Slowly I put the glass back on the counter.

"Yes." He gave a rippling laugh: a thin tattoo of sound that ran up the scale like an arpeggio. "Gin, rum, brandy, it doesn't matter. It takes up the aura of what's been in the bottle. Can't manage port, sherry, or wines, yet. Haven't worked that one out."

"But, what is it?"

"Smallbones' Elixir."

"But what do you want me to do with it?"

"Sell it, lad. Make it up, and sell it." He pushed the green bottle towards me. "This is a free sample, as you might say. To prove to you that it works, and to prove to me that you are reliable. There are four hundred and fifty shots in there.

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Four hundred and fifty bottles for nothing. Say you give a good measure, and average two pounds each: £900 clear profit."

I said, "But—" for the third time.

"You wouldn't let a little thing like the Customs and Excise worry you, or would you?"

"It's not that. But where do you come in?" The whole incident had a dreamlike quality now but, like a dream, it seemed quite natural.

"I'm building up the business. It's slow, because there's a difficulty in production. Very difficult on a gas-ring in digs, with the landlady shouting up the stairs all the time to know what you are cooking. I've got two good, steady clients in London, though another let me down. I thought I'd like to move out to the country. I read about you. And here I am."

"That still doesn't explain what you get out of it."

"This is a sample, see? All the profit is yours. If you stick to the rules, I'll bring a full bottle when I know you are satisfactory. That'll be a thousand shots. And we split the lolly, fifty-fifty."

"When will you contact me?"

"If you stick to the rules," he said, "I shall know when to come. Don't worry." And again he gave that trilling laugh. "Now, here they are. Quite simple. Keep that in the safe—" he patted the green bottle—"and top up the bottles on the quiet. Don't tell a soul, not even your wife—" he cocked an eye towards the ceiling. The sounds of household chores were still audible. "Next, don't lower your price, or cancel any quota from the brewers. That happened with one of my original clients, and the brewers became suspicious. They talked. And the result was a visit from the Excise to find out if the landlord had a private still in his bathroom, or was getting it from Holland on the sly. And last, don't ever try selling it outside permitted hours." He was very earnest about this stipulation, and when he pointed a finger at me I noticed how tiny his hands were.

"Why not?" I asked. "If you're going to break the law one way, you might as well break it another."

"It doesn't work, lad. The elixir, I mean. It goes sour if you do that. One of the things I can't understand."

I took another sip from my glass. It was just as good. "Won't you have one before you go?"

He slid off his stool. "Thank you, but I don't drink." He gave me a last warning about permitted hours—10.30 to 2, 6 to 10, grabbed his attaché case, and left.

I was alone, looking at that green bottle, wondering when I should wake up in bed from this nightmare, with Mary soothing me, telling me not to shout. But it wasn't a dream. The bottle

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was firm and cool under my hand. When I tried giving a shot to a gin and a brandy bottle, I topped them up, and they came out true to type, perfect. I hid the green bottle in the safe, and said nothing to Mary.

If you substitute a six-out measure for an eight-out, and keep prices the same, the news travels very quickly. I don't know what Mary thought, but I expect it was that I was getting stuff on a fast launch from the Continent. She didn't mention it, and I kept that green bottle out of sight.

In spite of the bad weather, the takings rose with a bound. Everything was lovely, until the night the clock stopped.

We were very busy, too busy to think of anything but serving, washing up, and giving occasional glances at the time. We had a large party that had been in every evening of their fortnight's holiday. The leader had just come up with a tray of empty glasses, saying, " Set 'em up again." He was a nice Midland type.

I was starting to serve them: large whiskies, a port and lemon, and a brandy and soda, when the door opened, and our constable, Jim Croucher, walked in. Instinct made me glance at the clock. The hand stood at exactly ten o'clock, which meant we had ten minutes' grace; but apparently Jim didn't think so.

As I put out my hand to take the money for the round, he said in his most official voice, " It's past time, Mr. Little."

There was a sudden hush in the bar. Everyone stared at his glass with the guilty look of a schoolboy caught out in some stupid prank. I glanced back at the clock.

" That's ten minutes fast, Constable, so we've another eight minutes." I was determined to be quite as formal.

" It isn't, you know." Slowly, a heavy, silver watch was pulled from a pocket. " The time now is four minutes past ten. Your clock must have stopped." He stood, impressive in cap and cape, waiting while the company gulped their drinks and scurried out.

Regretfully, I handed back the notes to the man in charge of the large round. " Sorry, but I can't serve you."

When all the customers had gone and I had bolted the door, I was able to relax. " I'm terribly sorry, Jim. I'd no idea—"

I rounded on Mary. " What happened? You forgot to wind it, I suppose. You always do."

Jim interposed quickly, " It doesn't matter, you've never done it before. And it's lucky that the Sergeant isn't making a ' point ' here with me tonight. We'll say no more about it."

His eye was on the tray of poured glasses on the counter.

" Thank you, Jim. It won't happen again. Will you have one for the road? "

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" Shouldn't when I'm on duty. But I'll have a sip of that port and lemon. I'm thirsty." He took the glass and raised it to his lips. I had just followed suit with one of the whiskies when I saw it happen. The amber colour was fading fast. Even as I watched, it changed to the palest yellow.

Quickly, I whipped both glasses under the counter. I dared not look round to the bottle on the shelf behind me.* I knew it would be doing the same, prayed that Jim would not notice.

Before I could grab the brandy, Mary had picked it up. "After that ticking-off," she said acidly, " I think I deserve a drink."

I watched her take the first sip, then spit it out. It had gone paler, too. " What on earth—? " she said. " It tastes horrible."

" Mine was all right." Jim set down his glass and smacked his lips. " Well, must be away now. Good night, you two."

After I had seen him out, I had to tell Mary.

We took down the brandy and the whisky and the gin from the shelf. They were all colourless, tasting of musty water. The green bottle in the safe was as bad, only stronger.

I tried, hopefully, to make up for it during the next few days, but it always came out the same. Trade has fallen off, Mr. Smallbones hasn't been back, and his name isn't in the directory.

Before I threw it away, I took the stopper out of the green bottle for a final sniff. There was only mustiness, becoming stronger and stronger. But I swear I heard that funny, trilling laugh, very faint, coming from the depths of that green bottle.

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HIGH SPIRITS

The horse and mule live 30 *years*
And nothing know of wines and beers.
The goat and sheep at 20 *die*
And never taste of Scotch or Rye
The dog at 15 *cashes in*
Without the aid of rum and gin.
The modest, sober, bone-dry hen
Lays eggs for nogs, then dies at 10.
All animals are strictly dry:
They sinless live and swiftly die;
But sinful, ginful, rum-soaked men
Survive for three score years and ten.
And some of them, a very few,
Stay pickled till they're 92.

ANON, *Poor Beasts !*

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BRACE OF PHEASANTS

Mustn't let himself be bested by a sneaking keeper

BY LESLIE BONNET

THE moment Mr. Maiden said it, a frozen silence held the bar of The Load of Hay. The Christmas decorations lost instantly their effect of gaiety. Dick Snout, the young gamekeeper, his thin, sneering face taut, stared at the schoolmaster. The pint pot, arrested halfway to his lips, hung in the air like an oath.

Mr. Maiden, nastily aware of a quietness that he would have given much to enforce in class, looked affectingly towards the innkeeper, Zachariah Hobday, for approval. Zachariah avoided his eye.

The silence broke with a crash when the gamekeeper threw his pot down upon the stone floor, turned abruptly on his heel, and stamped out. The bar door banged behind him. The outer door slammed.

Mr. Maiden, completely bewildered, found himself gazing stupidly at the broken glass dabbled in beer that was strewn at his feet. "What happened?" he appealed weakly. "I only said that I'd give a brace of pheasants for the Football Club Christmas draw."

"Well, a mug got broken," said the landlord, making his way out from behind the bar with the brush and dustpan which were always prudently kept at hand.

Joe Raggett lifted the long skirts of his jacket to thrust both fists in his trousers pockets. He surveyed for a few moments his black-gaitered legs. "You spoke a bit owdacious, Mr. Maiden."

"Indeed?" queried the schoolmaster. "Why should Snout take offence? Surely he didn't imagine that I was intending any harm to *his* pheasants?"

"Why, of course he did," said Joe Raggett, his apple-red face shining with enjoyment.

"Good gracious me! Impossible!"

"Why, you has to be reasonable, Mr. Maiden," said Joe.

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" Zachariah, here, asks if you can give a prize for the Christmas draw. Horrible young Dick Snout is here, drinking surly. You up and say you'll give a brace of pheasants. We all heard you, didn't we? Well now, it's Dick's bad job to look after the pheasants, d'ye see. It's like you're daring him to stop you, and him so ockerd too, drat him! "

" Great heavens! What nonsense! " snapped Mr. Maiden, his earnest features flushed with embarrassment. " I intended to buy the pheasants, of course. Surely people buy pheasants, not steal them—I mean, poach them."

" Nobody buys them in this village," said Joe stoutly. " Not in Lashings Episcopi."

" Well, never mind," declared the schoolmaster. " It's soon mended. I'll drop in on Dick Snout tomorrow evening and explain. It can all be put right in a few words."

" Think so? " asked Joe coldly, rocking slowly on his heels.

" Of course I do."

" Dick's had shame put on him, public. He won't be easy to talk to."

" Nonsense, Raggett," snapped Mr. Maiden. " I can handle Dick."

" Like you handled him at school? "

Mr. Maiden coloured again. " That's different, Raggett. He was difficult as a boy, I know."

" Well, what about the boys at school now? Aren't they difficult, too? "

Mr. Maiden frowned. " Difficult? Well, I don't know—"

" What are they going to say when they know that you put a dare on Dick and then backed out? "

" Oh dear! " said Mr. Maiden. " Do you really think that? "

Joe nodded sagely. Mr. Maiden looked helplessly round the bar. He saw only nods. While he stood there, irresolute, the distant strains of " Good King Wenceslas," made themselves heard in the laboured silence.

Zachariah Hobday bent his long body over the bar. " They've started practice, seemingly," he said.

" Oh, excellent! " said Mr. Maiden hastily. " You must excuse me, gentlemen. Carol practice, you know." He drained his glass with a grimace, and went.

Joe Raggett followed him to the outer door. He placed a large hand on Mr. Maiden's shrinking shoulder. " I'll help you, never fear," he told him.

" Heaven forbid! " said Mr. Maiden.

" Don't be shy of taking help, Mr. Maiden," urged Joe hoarsely. " I mean to help you, say what you may."

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Eager to be gone, Mr. Maiden found himself crowded against the wall of The Load of Hay. Joe Raggett caught him confidentially by his lapel.

" I'm not the man to stand by and see you made a mock of in school," Joe assured him. " Likewise, I won't leave you to outsmart that dratted Dick Snout single-handed. 'Tisn't in your line, Mr. Maiden. I'm on your side, d'ye see." Joe spoke thickly into Mr. Maiden's shrinking ear. " I'll tell 'ee for why, Mr. Maiden. That Dick is after my Gladys."

The hot menace in Joe Raggett's voice startled the schoolmaster. " But surely, Joe, a very suitable match," he ventured lamely.

" Suitable! " shouted Joe, all discretion forgotten. " Suitable! A slinking keeper and my Gladys—brought up strict. Up half the night like he is? Meeting in the woods—? "

Footsteps, which Mr. Maiden had with some uneasiness heard coming down the lane, stopped abruptly. Now he heard them approaching. The glow of light through the bar curtains revealed the drawn features and monumental nose of the Vicar of Lashings Episcopi.

" Ah, Raggett. Ah, Maiden. My dear fellows," he said carefully. " Meeting in the woods—? "

" Oh, just in a manner of speaking," offered Joe uneasily.

" But who? "

Neither answered him.

The Vicar coughed fretfully, then passed the matter off with a baffled laugh. He stroked his chin and looked up at the sparkling sky. " One has that unpleasant sensation," he said, " of a nearness of wrongdoing. It is as if it were just around the next corner. It is a feeling one gets in Lashings Episcopi. Ah well, I must not linger. I hear the carol practice is in full swing. Worthy work, worthy work, Mr. Maiden. In aid of—ah yes, of course—the Old Folk's Party. Very worthy; though I still hope that one Christmas the repair of the bell might be considered.

" Meeting in the woods. Do you know, I sometimes fancy that it would be in some ways a blessing if all those trees were cut down, root and branch, with an axe. Aha! " And, coughing conclusively, the Vicar hurried off down the lane towards the Vicarage.

" Got a wonderful nose for sin, has the Vicar," said Joe.

At the same time he released his hold, and Mr. Maiden, uttering insincere thanks, was able to edge himself free and slip through the wicket gate at the side of the inn.

" My Gladys'll be there, and Ma," Joe told him before turning back towards the bar door.

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Mr. Maiden was well aware of that.

Quite innocent of any vile designs, he was yet always acutely conscious of the mature charms of Mrs. Raggett, just as he was embarrassed by the disorderly ripeness of her daughter, Gladys. To stand near to Mrs. Raggett at carol practices, his determined tenor voice chasing her rich contralto across the shapely hills and dales of serious melody was a sweet adventure to him. It was an adventure marred only if Mrs. Raggett, with less consciousness of sin than he and with, therefore, less concern for rectitude, should turn upon him her mild, dark eyes. These, with the placid acceptance of beasts of husbandry, seemed to invite and condone conduct of which Mr. Maiden dared not even think.

And so it was that, stumbling dazedly into the lighted recreation hut behind The Load of Hay, nervously stroking his sparse hair into order, Mr. Maiden became at once conscious of Mrs. Raggett, her head uplifted, red lips parted in song, ruminative eyes turned down upon him.

Reddening violently, Mr. Maiden squeezed into place behind and a little to one side of her; and, while he raised his voice in song, dwelt, perhaps quite unconsciously, upon the rich curve of the pink cheek of Mrs. Raggett.

Would that all of Mr. Maiden's evenings, with Christmastide so nearly approaching, had been spent as innocently. But the solid weight of village opinion and the confident leadership of Joe Raggett did not permit of more than fitful dalliance with carols.

One fearful night after another fearful night, the unhappy schoolmaster, under Joe's harsh tuition, found himself forced to undertake unhappy poaching expeditions. In vain did Mr. Maiden plead to be permitted to buy a brace of pheasants in a decent and legal manner.

He mustn't let himself be bested, Joe admonished him, by a sneaking keeper, least of all by one who had the audaciousness to aspire to the hand of Gladys.

But bested Mr. Maiden was, and Joe Raggett, too. It really seemed that Dick Snout was everywhere. Whether Joe had decided to try the high mass of Outercross Wood or the tangled covers that lay down along Up Pendleton Bottom, the result was always the same. Almost before Joe, complete with folding gun, torch, and sack, all snuggled beneath his capacious jacket, or Mr. Maiden, an unarmed auxiliary, had even climbed the first fence or struggled through the first thorn hedge, there would be the flat voice of Dick Snout, " Lost your way, Mr. Raggett? "

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Even when on an evening of howling wind the couple headed back from the village towards the tangled thickness of Plantation Wood, a resort so inhospitable to game that none but the ignorant or the desperate would essay it, there was the keeper, his sneer visible in fitful moonlight, apparently awaiting them.

"Good evening, Mr. Maiden, sir. Good evening, Joe."

"Why, good evening, Dick," said Mr. Maiden, shrill with shock.

Joe growled, frustrated.

"Going for a walk?" inquired Snout.

Joe pushed himself forward. "You know damned well we aren't," he blustered.

The keeper surveyed with a nasty expression the unnaturally bulky look of Joe Raggett. Without seeming to do so, he induced his audience to retrace their steps. The three, their unequal strides making an unrhythmic clatter on the hard road, went for a while in uneasy silence.

"Time we spoke," said Dick at last, unpleasantly. "I don't bear you much grudge, Mr. Maiden; not considering what a stupid you are. But I'll get you if you go on with this sort of lark. And I'm not saying it wouldn't help pay off a few old scores. But I owe you something, Joe. And you'll get it. Coming between me and my Gladys—"

"Your Gladys!" Joe grated.

"That's what I said." Dick's voice was cold. "That girl of yours thinks a lot of me, see. Well, that suits me."

"Doesn't know her own mind," growled Joe.

"No; but I do."

"Meeting surreptitious."

"What if we do?"

"I'll put a stop to it!"

Dick Snout halted in the roadway. "No, you won't, Joe. Not with what I'll pin on you if you try it."

Joe hunched his shoulders. Mr. Maiden stepped back a pace or two. A fight seemed likely. But Dick Snout did not wait for trouble. He shook a fist and then walked briskly up the road ahead. "Just try and see!" he shouted over his shoulder.

Dejected, resentful, Mr. Maiden and Mr. Raggett trudged back into Lashings Episcopi. When Joe had rid himself of his weapon and equipment they met in The Load of Hay. Seated in the farthest corner they stared listlessly into their mugs.

"I hate to say it," Joe finally confided, "but I reckon you'll have to buy those pheasants, Mr. Maiden, after all."

Mr. Maiden nodded enthusiastically. His whole bearing brightened. "I'll go tomorrow," he said quickly.

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" Just a minute. Just a minute," begged Joe. " Give me time. We can buy them off someone on the quiet, see. If you go shopping for them everybody will know, make us look silly. No, let me find out first. I've got plenty of friends. Then, if we can turn up here with a nice brace, why, everyone'll think we shot them by night; and that dratted Dick Snout will be took down a peg."

Some of Mr. Maiden's exhilaration drained away. But he nodded bravely. Joe patted his hand. " You'll be in time for carol practice, after all," he said.

" So I shall," said Mr. Maiden, jumping up eagerly. " So I shall."

" I'll stay here," grunted Mr. Raggett. " I'll wait and take our Gladys home. Can't trust her mother. Too romantic. That Dick Snout'll be hanging about outside when they finish."

Mr. Maiden went out.

" I'll let you know," Joe shouted after him.

Outside, the waxing moon was high in the stormy sky. A bluster of wind blundered down the village street so that for a moment the ardent voices from within the recreation hut could not be heard.

Mr. Maiden, feeling emancipated, looked cheerfully at the hurrying clouds and kindly at the chinks of light from the recreation hut. Then, with quick, precise steps he bounded along the pathway towards the mirth and the melody.

There were fourteen days left before Christmas.

Surprisingly, Mrs. Raggett was absent from carol practice that evening, but Gladys was there. Mr. Maiden regretted this. There was something altogether too generous about Gladys. She was one of those " milk and roses " complexioned girls on whom the gleaming skin seems only just capable of a severe task. In intervals, appreciative no doubt of Mr. Maiden's unimpeachable social standing, she gave him glances from under eyelashes that were a little too luxuriant. Indeed, everything about Gladys, from whichever direction one viewed her, was a little too luxuriant.

" Mum can't come tonight," she confided. " She's got a cold."

" Oh dear! " said Mr. Maiden, genuinely distressed.

" She's wrapped up cosy in bed," said Gladys with relish.

Mr. Maiden shut his eyes. It took the rap of the conductor's baton to drag him back to reality.

When the practice was over, Mr. Maiden hovered behind Gladys, prepared, if Joe Raggett should have forgotten his intention, to steer the disputed girl safely home himself.

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But Joe was waiting, in a posture unsuited to the time of year. He was sitting on the cobbles with his back supported by the front wall of The Load of Hay. Attentive companions were administering what must have been expensive stimulants, if one were to judge by the hoarse admonishments of, "Steady, Joe!" "Careful, Joe, don't spill it!" that were being offered.

Gladys, quicker than Mr. Maiden to appreciate a situation, rushed to bend over her father. "Come on, Dad, now. What will Mum say?"

Joe, shaking his head wearily, struggled with assistance to his feet. Friends hastened to explain.

"He's not drunk. He's hurt."

"It was Dick Snout!"

"He was jumping on Joe, seemingly."

"Good for Dick!" said Gladys firmly. "Come on, Dad." And, seizing Joe's arm, she led him away.

It was more than a week before Mr. Maiden saw Joe again. Christmas fell on a Saturday that year. On the Monday evening before it, Mr. Maiden was just turning into the gate that led to the recreation hut when a huge hand seized his arm.

"Want you," said Joe importantly.

Mr. Maiden started. "Oh, it's you, Joe. I mustn't stay more than a moment. It's the choir. We're doing our first carol round tonight."

"Can't be helped," said Joe. And then, in a hard whisper, "Look, I've found out where we can get that brace of pheasants."

"Not poaching, Joe!"

"Bless you, no," assured Mr. Raggett, slapping Mr. Maiden's back. "I know of a place over at Up Pendleton. A chap's got a brace."

Mr. Maiden checked his impatience to be gone. "Look, Joe. This is quite honest and above-board?"

"Well, sort of."

"Oh dear!" Mr. Maiden's heart sank. "Do you mean this man may have—" he lowered his voice—"poached them?"

"Might have. Wouldn't be civil to ask, d'ye see."

Mr. Maiden sighed. "Ah, well. At least it's better than that awful crawling about. All right, Joe. Thank you very much. What will they cost? I'll give you the money now."

"I want you with me," said Joe.

"Oh, surely!" Mr. Maiden protested.

"It's like this," explained Joe. "You're supposed to be getting these pheasants. Everyone'll know you didn't if I turn up with them, and you out with the carol singers."

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"But I can't possibly! What will the choir say?"

"Who cares?" growled Joe. "Ah, here comes the bus."

The single-decker, sole vehicle of the New Enterprise Bus Company came clattering down the village street and drew up outside The Load of Hay, radiator bubbling, steamy windows rattling with the vehemence of its engine. Feebly protesting, Mr. Maiden found himself wedged at the back end.

"I'll pay," shouted Joe, who was standing on Mr. Maiden's feet. An elbow in Mr. Maiden's mouth as Joe searched for coppers prevented any remonstrance.

Mr. Maiden had not before visited The Sun at Up Pendleton. It was a dubious-looking resort. Mr. Maiden thought it grimy.

However, Joe seemed to be very pleasantly at home there. He ordered drinks and, as the twitching landlord served, put a question to him in confidential tones. The landlord jerked his head towards the table beside the dartboard. A short man with a face of completely impassive wickedness got up from his seat there and approached. Joe went to meet him. Mr. Maiden could hear Joe asking questions. The man said nothing at all. It was obvious that for assent he gave a wicked blink, and for rejection a reckless swing of his head.

Joe came back to Mr. Maiden. "Two quid," he said.

Mr. Maiden nodded, and produced two pound notes. The man folded them up, thrust them into a pocket in his loose waistcoat and, without another look, went out.

"Where are the pheasants?" asked Mr. Maiden prudently.

"Landlord's got them."

"Ah!" Mr. Maiden addressed himself to a pot of beer. It tasted tart and smelt of washing-up. Mr. Maiden eyed it with dread; and then, seeing Joe's obvious satisfaction with the place, suspended all his senses by an effort of will, and drained the mug.

"Another drink, Mr. Maiden," suggested Joe. "Bus doesn't leave till ten to ten. Loads of time yet."

Mr. Maiden sighed. "I think, perhaps, just half a pint of ale," he said.

"Two pints," ordered Joe.

As the minutes trickled by, the saloon seemed to Mr. Maiden to become less grubby, the patrons (with whom even he had begun to exchange a few words) less furtive. He could perceive, too, that what he had mistaken for a dipsomaniacal twitch on the landlord's sordid face was in fact nothing less than a jovial wink.

A young man with a wealth of black hair related to them an anecdote which was, Mr. Maiden felt sure, irresistibly funny, could he but have understood a word of it. The schoolmaster laughed shrilly and without moderation. In the midst of this

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long peal of merriment he stopped suddenly. "Joe, the bus!"

"Gone five minutes ago," said Joe comfortably. "What has to be will be." This remark evoked general approval. Joe drained his mug. "After all, what's four mile? One for the road, eh?"

"My turn," said Mr. Maiden. So it was at just those few minutes after ten o'clock that custom, if not the law, allows for the draining of drinking vessels, that Mr. Maiden and Joe Raggett set out to return to Lashings Episcopi.

Mr. Maiden looked bravely up at the moon, riding high in a clear sky. The air was keen. The road rang under his feet. Mr. Maiden lifted his bowler hat to stroke his thin hair into position over the bald patch, and then kicked his heels zestfully on the hard road. Joe, from whose fist dangled the brace of pheasants, brandished them wildly at the placid moon.

Many house windows still blazed with light to show Christmas trees a-twinkle with colour. A waft of carol from down a side street filled Mr. Maiden's bosom with a remorse which, to his surprise, gave him a sense of sad pleasure.

With the last dwelling behind them, a solitary light upstairs as if it slept with one eye open, the pair stamped bravely down the moonlit lane. In their wake, snatches of manful music littered the night's smooth silence. Over the bridge at Chantreys they swung left-handed along Up Pendleton Bottom.

A mile ahead of them, on the hill at the valley's end, lay Lashings Episcopi behind its trees. Away up at the top of the pastures on their right, black under the frozen moonlight, lay the deep expanses of Outercross Wood.

The success of the expedition and the healthful exercise of walking had brought peace and satisfaction to Mr. Maiden's mind. He did not talk much as they swung briskly along the valley bottom. Indeed there was little demand for it; for Joe Raggett, elated by more causes than one, maintained a steady output of conversation. He was enlarging upon the chagrin which Dick Snout would presently experience when, stopping suddenly, he gripped Mr. Maiden's arm. "What's that?"

Both stopped. Both looked and listened.

Ahead of them a lane branched off, up and over the hillside, towards Grantley Green. At this road junction, just where the old holly tree shadowed the lane, it seemed that a knot of persons shifted and wavered in the uncertain light. A number of voices reached their ears and then, distinctly, a woman's laugh, rich, contralto, careless, generous-sounding. Joe's tension relaxed at once. "All right," he announced. "It's Ma."

Mr. Maiden had reached the same conclusion. "It's the carol party, surely."

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It was. Within a few moments the pair was in the midst of a sizeable group. Joe, pheasant tail-feathers dangling from beneath his jacket, greeted everyone in the highest of spirits. Mr. Maiden, more diffident in attitude, hovered, pleasantly excited.

"We're just going up to Mob Farm," Gladys told them. "We've done most everywhere else."

"Ain't you tired, my pretty?" her father asked her with a show of concern.

"Oh no, Dad!"

"Yes, you are," said Joe. "Here, Ma, you take her along home now. Time you was abed, girl. Mr. Maiden and me'll take your places. Now then, Martha, off you go."

Wife and daughter allowed themselves to be separated from the flock. "Here," hissed Joe to his daughter. "Take these home careful. Hold 'em crafty. Don't let everybody see." And, grunting, he drew the pheasants from about his person and handed them to Gladys.

Mr. Maiden left the hesitating group of carollers and joined them. The prospect of carolling had ceased to appeal to him. "I think I'd better be getting back, too, Joe. Perhaps I can see the ladies home."

"Splendid!" said Joe. "Don't forget supper, Martha. Four rashers, mind; thick."

"All right," he shouted to the singers, "off we go then." Shouting farewells, they moved off up Grantley Green lane.

Under the still shadow of the holly tree, Mrs. Raggett and Gladys and Mr. Maiden watched them go.

"Well?" said Mrs. Raggett. Gladys giggled.

Mr. Maiden squeaked in an effort to say something. At last in a desperate voice he managed to utter, "It's a beautiful night."

"Lovely," said Mrs. Raggett.

In the shadows he could see her eyes, warm and glowing. Gladys was swinging the pheasants and one shapely leg. While Mr. Maiden watched this performance, earnestly seeking in his mind for something more to say, Mrs. Raggett swung a well-developed arm and boxed Gladys upon the ear.

"Mum!" cried Gladys, "whatever did you do that for?"

"I don't know, dear," said Mrs. Raggett. "But I'll do it again if you don't stop fidgeting. Look here, you get along with those things there. You can take the short cut up the field and along the woods. Mr. Maiden and me'll come along the lane."

Gladys, whimpering a little, began to climb, not inelegantly, over the iron railings.

"Let me take the birds," suggested Mr. Maiden.

"No." Mrs. Raggett did not intend he should be encumbered.

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" Gladys'll take them home. Won't you, Gladys? "

The pair watched as the generous figure of Gladys toiled across the moon-silvered pasture to Outercross Wood. When it had quite disappeared they began in uneasy silence to walk the lane's wide curve toward Lashings Episcopi. Acute nervousness made Mr. Maiden uncertain upon his feet; or was it that from moment to moment Mrs. Raggett bumped lightly against him?

Mr. Maiden, like other dreamers, had never prepared his mind to expect that dreams could come true. With astonishment and acute alarm he discovered that he was being slowly forced nearer and nearer to the ditch on his side of the lane.

The compelling presence of Mrs. Raggett riveted his eyes upon hers. Like a rabbit mesmerised, all power of movement left him. He could hear a faint waft of carol borne across the valley on the Christmas air. Back along towards Chantreys an owl hooted.

Then, away up where Outercross Wood loomed dark and heavy, Gladys screamed—in terror first, there was no doubt of that; and then in rage. There could be heard harsh shouts of protest, of anguish; and resounding thumps.

Abandoning all else, Mrs. Raggett and Mr. Maiden clambered over the fence and pelted up the pasture.

It cost Mr. Maiden another two pounds. As Joe afterwards explained, " There wasn't much left of them pheasants when she'd finished thumping Dick Snout with them. Can't say, though, that it didn't serve him right. No nice girl likes to have a pig-net thrown over her, at least not near midnight; in the woods, too. Thought it was me, he tried to tell her. But you can't tell my Gladys nothing, not when she's roused up proper.

" Pity about Parson, though. Don't know what he was doing up there. He hadn't got an axe with him. Must have been taking a walk. Seems he met our Gladys and offered to see her back to the village. And before they knowed it, there they was, in a pig-net together.

" Yes, Dick Snout's sworn out a summons against him, too. Parson was carrying the pheasants for our Glad.

" Ah well, what has to be, will be. Have another drink, Mr. Maiden. Come on. It's Christmas Day tomorrow—the happiest Christmas of my life. Gladys and Dick Snout won't be walking out any more."

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WATER BUTT

The dragon in shallow water becomes the butt of shrimps.

Chinese Proverb

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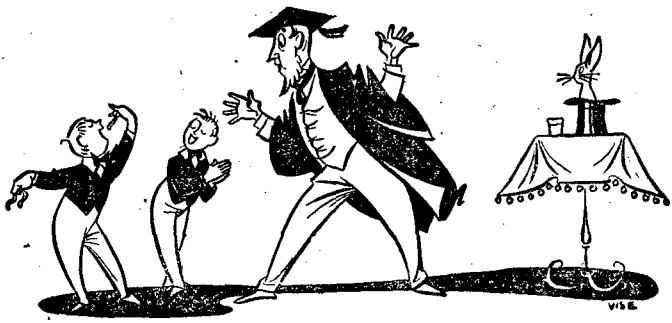

Hit and Mystery

He has hissed all my mystery lessons and tasted three worms.

DR. SPOONER

The writer of whodunits strews
Along the way important clues
And sly allusions
Designed to be a help to each
And every one of us to reach
The wrong conclusions.

RICHARD ARMOUR, *Ah, Sweet Mystery!*

Mysterious Smile

" If they get too big for their boots and start asking for more money, be calm. Make miv a mysterious smile like this—" Sam Yudenow contorted his face in a grimace so frightful that my heart missed a beat—" an' say, ' Why, sure, certainly, ladies and gentlemen, I'll see what I can do for you. Don't you worry, ladies and gentlemen, I'll speak to Mr. Yudenow about it this very minute . . .' I ask you—if you say to your grandmother miv a mysterious smile: ' Darling, let me teach you to suck eggs,' wouldn't she be right to give you the left arm in the thvoat an' the right 'and in the seat of the trousers? Naturally . . ."

I said: " I wonder why you have two different signs hanging outside your café, Mr. Yudenow. Well? "

He was delighted. " So you admit it got you asking questions, eh? It got you on the guess. You'd look twice at a place miv

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two signs, ain't it? You pause. You stop. Before you know where you are, you come in miv a mysterious smile an' say: 'Uxcuse me but whereas you got two different signs?' An' you go out miv a packet cigarettes or a rissole or a bar chocolate. Show biz."

GERALD KERSH, *Fowlers End*

The Mysterious Philosopher

Probable-Possible, my black hen,
She lays eggs in the Relative When.
She doesn't lay eggs in the Positive Now
Because she's unable to Postulate How.

FREDERICK WINSOR

Puzzle Corner

"Never mind, I love London, even without pictures, and English women I love."

"Do you? Don't we seem terribly dowdy?"

"Of course. That's what makes you so amusing and mysterious. What can you possibly do all day?"

"Do?"

"Yes. How do you fill those endless eons of time when Frenchwomen are having their hair washed, trying on hats . . . discussing with the lingère—what is lingère in English?"

"Underclothes-maker."

"Hours they spend with the underclothes-maker. What a funny word—are you sure? Anyhow, Frenchwomen always give one to understand that arranging themselves is full-time work. Now you English, like flowers in a basket, are not arranged, which is quite all right when the flowers are spring flowers . . . But how do you fill in the time? That is the great puzzle."

NANCY MITFORD, *The Blessing*

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Mystic Miscellany

" Moonlight is a thing of the night, all these things beginning with M are: there's Moonlight, and Murder, and Mystery, and Missing the Midnight Train, and Mourning, and Much-loved Pa; all dark, sorrowful things."

JOHN MASEFIELD, *The Midnight Folk*

Dunno Whodunit

Some day the murderer's going to baulk
In the last few pages and refuse to talk.
He'll down his arsenic enigmatically,
Denying all charges of crime emphatically.

And then no reader will ever know
The reason behind the eerie glow
In the haunted house that the hero inherited,
And all the corpses will go unferreted.

Chronic insomnia or malnutrition
Will have to explain the apparition
That wandered at will and never knocked
Whenever the doors were double-locked.

The jewels will be misplaced irretrievably.
Nothing will be glossed over unbelievably.
Amid cries of dismay and epithets blistery,
The mystery will firmly remain a mystery.

VIRGINIA BRASIER, *Very Mysterious*

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CHANGE OF HEART

He wasn't going to be shopped by her after getting past all the cops

BY EDITH PARGETER

THE London train had scarcely slithered backwards into its bay when young Billy, with his shiny, choirboy face, came bustling down the platform in a fawn raincoat three sizes too big for him, the kind thrifty mothers buy " to last him," and clambered demurely into the front coach. Once aboard, he clambered out, with equal aplomb, through the door on the corridor side, leaving it wide open behind him, dropped to the track of the empty bay behind, screened from observation by the train he had left and the long curve of the line, and scuttled across it into the low bushes of the embankment.

" About time! " said Freddo, reaching out soiled, sweating hands to haul him into cover. " Are the busies loose on the station? The old bloke didn't kick the bucket, did he? " His hands were shaking as he pulled on the raincoat and pocketed the stub of pasteboard that would get him safely out of Mersham.

" On the barrier, but not inside. They'll be waiting at Paddington, you can bet. No, the old chap didn't croak; nothing up with him but concussion. Not concussed half enough! He described the lot of you. They picked up Fats, hopping a lift out on a lorry, but he won't say nothing."

Without the raincoat, young Billy looked what he was, a gangling thirteen-year-old in threadbare flannels and lumber jacket. He watched critically as Freddo turned up the collar of the coat about his scratched, brown neck, and ran a comb tremulously through his dark curls. " You'll do. Better get aboard, before the early birds start arriving, and somebody spots that door. How're you going to get clear the other end? "

" Drop off the train in that tunnel before the terminus. They always wait there. Have a look up the line for us, quick! "

" All clear. Go on, run for it."

And Freddo ran. Any moment now the shopping women would be rolling down the platform in droves. He clawed his way up to the open door, sweating with nerves, cold and trembling with sleeplessness. If they'd pulled in Fats they'd got half

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the money back. Where Jonty'd gone to with the rest nobody seemed to know, but Freddo hadn't got a thing out of the whole damn business, except a night in the bushes and the prospect of three years in jug if he didn't pick up his feet pretty lively.

He hauled himself aboard, pulled the door to after him, and leaned out to turn the handle, heaving a gasping sigh of relief.

The slightest of movements in the corridor made him swing round wildly, his breath stuck in his throat. And there she was, standing in a queerly hesitant manner in the doorway of the nearest compartment, not three yards from him, the earliest of the early birds. Sixteen, maybe; hatless; fair; with big, soft, startled, grey eyes staring at him; and a thin, thrusting, eager, anxious face, her head inclined sideways, as though she was listening.

She stood staring at him for a moment, and then a deep flush surged upwards from chin to brow. She backed hurriedly into the compartment and sat down in the corner, her shoulder turned upon him. But she didn't remove her attention from him. Her hand quivered with tension on her small handbag. She still listened to him, with a birdlike turn of her head.

She'd seen him climb up from the line. She must have seen him run out of the bushes. Damn her, what did she have to come so early for? And why walk all the way down to the front coach? What was he to do about her now? Walk down the train and get well out of her sight? But what good was that? She knew he was aboard. No, don't leave her! Stick to her close, so close she won't dare to make a move. I'm not going to be shopped by a dowdy little skirt like her, he thought, after getting past half the cops in Mersham last night.

He slipped into the compartment, and sat down opposite her. The afternoon shoppers began to move along the platform in a languid, lengthening wave, until they washed even into this advanced position. The spray deposited in the carriage two fat, respectable women, and a courting couple who clung entranced in their corner unaware that they were not alone.

The last flurry washed up the length of the platform, slamming the doors. The train began to move. Three-quarters of an hour to the tunnel, half an hour's walk from there to Eddie's place, a change of coats again, a new haircut, glasses, and who was going to pick out Freddo in a London crowd?

But she knew! She was drawn back constrainedly into her corner, her face turned towards the window; but she was studying him with desperate attention. When he couldn't bear it any longer he felt in the pockets of his coat for the means of

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occupying, or at least hiding, his trembling hands. Young Billy had done him proud. A morning paper, a magazine, cigarettes, and matches. He unfolded the paper as a screen between himself and her, but he still felt her there, thinking about him.

After a while, not knowing himself what he was going to do, he lowered the paper, looked straight across at her, and held out the magazine with a half-hearted gesture of invitation.

She looked stonily back at him with those large, plaintive eyes of hers, and neither moved nor spoke. His motion froze in mid air, and clumsily he tucked the magazine away under him in the corner of the seat. He felt sick with fright, and even sicker with hatred of her. He wished he could wring that skinny little doll's neck. Sweat was crawling down his back like beetles. She had spotted him. She wasn't going to talk, she was too scared, but she was only waiting her chance.

Twenty-five minutes yet to the tunnel. The girl got up abruptly, opened the door, and went out into the corridor. Panic boiled up in Freddo's throat like nausea. He dared not let her out of his sight. Once she was away from him she could buttonhole the guard, or anyone, and blurt out what she'd seen. He blundered after her, and closed the door.

She was leaning forward against the window rail on her folded arms, her head turned away from him. He came to her elbow, the packet of cigarettes quaking drunkenly in his hand.

"Like to smoke, miss?" he quavered.

He'd said a magic word, or something. She turned a small, flushed face, suddenly shining with a diffident smile. She shook her head shyly, and didn't say a word, but she'd come alive. It was then that he saw the lingering tears in the grey eyes.

"What's the matter?" he asked, confounded.

"You're quite young," she said, surprisingly. "I felt sure you were, but I didn't know for certain until you spoke."

He stared back at her, and didn't know what to make of her, or what to say. "I'm eighteen. I don't look as ancient as all that, do I?"

"Did you really not notice, then?" She flashed into joy. "I was afraid it was obvious."

"What, that you— You don't mean to say you're blind?" He couldn't believe it, he felt his inside liquefy and his knees turn to jelly with relief, and yet it was he who winced away from the word, not she. She was beaming. She was almost pretty, she was so pleased that he hadn't realised she couldn't see him.

"Well, not really blind—what we call partially sighted. I can see light, and just shapes, you know, but that's all."

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"You poor kid," he said. "You poor kid!"

He, who'd been thinking nothing but, Freddo, you poor kid! ever since the old nightwatchman had yelled and the gang had scattered. His inside went on liquefying into an anguish he couldn't account for, never before having felt sorry for anyone but himself. Those great eyes, and yet she couldn't see! A twilight of moving shapes, nothing more. Like night all the time.

"You mustn't be sorry for us," she said. "Could you really not tell?"

"Never dreamt! You manage fine." He felt light and safe because she hadn't seen him, and desperately sad because she never would, not him or anyone. He closed his eyes, letting a vague filtering of light pierce the long, lowered fringe of lashes. Like that all the time. But in earnest. No good opening your eyes again.

"I wanted to do this journey on my own," she said, blinking. "I'm going to the College of Music for the Blind, to study the piano. I used to be at the Blind School in Mersham until last term. I wanted to manage all by myself, luggage, and ticket, and everything; that's why I came so early. In case I got into difficulties, you see. I wanted to show how normal I could be, and how well I could manage. The first time alone. But now I'm a bit scared. London's different. Big and busy. I'm frightened of it." She smiled at him, but in the middle of the smile the corners of her mouth turned down, and her chin shook.

Freddo stretched his arm round her, to lean on the rail beside her. He felt her shiver for a moment, and then relax against his shoulder. "No need to be scared. Somebody'll look after you."

"I'm glad there was somebody young," she said. "Older people frighten me." And, after a moment, "My name's Linda. What's yours?"

"Anthony," he said. It was the name he'd always wished they'd given him. Classy. And it felt like his name. Anyhow, he didn't feel like Freddo now.

The guard swayed along the corridor and collected their tickets without a second glance. She was telling him all about the school, and how they taught you to play the piano, when the shrill of the whistle tore him away from her and back to himself. The tunnel! He had to go. There wouldn't be another opportunity after this.

The train began to slow, pounding forward into thick darkness. Slow flares passed. Steam hissed. The train shivered and was still.

He mumbled some excuse into her ear, and walked away to

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the end of the corridor. When he looked back over his shoulder she was standing there quite still, her anxious, listening face turned to follow his going. The great eyes peered through their everlasting twilight after him with an inexpressible sorrow and loneliness. He still saw them when he was round the corner of the coach, alone, safe, cautiously opening the door upon the friendly darkness.

And then, quite suddenly, he couldn't go. It was no use poking one foot out into the void, he was only pretending, he knew he couldn't do it.

He shut the door again, cursing horribly under his breath.

He went back round the corner, and watched her glow as she picked up the sound of his step.

" Think I'd left you? I wouldn't do that. Come and sit down for a bit, we shall be there in ten minutes."

When she smiled at him, he knew it was something he'd never forget. He couldn't think of anyone else who'd ever stopped being frightened just because he came near.

The train slithered into the long arrival platform, and Freddo lifted down her suitcases and her raincoat, and then took her hand to guide her from the train. There, at the end of the curving platform, strung out so that the scurrying arrivals must pass between them, he counted six policemen.

" You sit here a minute," he said, steering Linda to a seat, and placing the cases beside her, " I'll get you a taxi."

It was no use trying to snaffle one and send her on her way before they saw him, they'd only fall on him at the wrong moment and ruin everything. He marched straight towards them, his hands out of his pockets so that they should see he wasn't up to anything. Before he was within twenty yards they had spotted him. They drew together, peaceful smiles on their faces, navy-blue arms reaching to surround him protectively.

" O.K., O.K.," said Freddo, " I came straight to you, didn't I? I'm not making any fuss. Only do me a favour first, will you? You can keep hold of me, if you like, there's enough of you." They were sceptical and wary, but having their hands on him made it worth while listening.

" See that kid there, with the luggage? She's blind—well, practically blind. She's going to a school here; first time, see? She wanted to be big and do it alone, and now she's scared. I told her I'd get a taxi for her. Let me send her off safe, and then I'll come along quiet. There's enough people about, you can stand all round us, and she won't know. Only keep your mouths shut, see? "

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It was out of sheer curiosity that the sergeant complied. There was nothing to lose, with so many ready hands at his disposal, and so little prospect of a break for freedom. And it might even be true. Something odd was always happening in this racket.

Nothing odder, however, than the flourish with which hard-case Freddo Evans handed this big-eyed waif into the taxi, and gave the driver the address of her college, and a ten-shilling note out of his own pocket.

And nothing more unexpected than the way she leaned out at the last minute, offered her face to be kissed, and said, " You've been so kind, Anthony. I shall never forget you."

Anthony! The sergeant was still grinning when he stowed his silent, pale, entranced prisoner into the police car, and climbed in beside him. After all those obliging young judies that ran round with Jonty's gang, this wide boy had to walk into a net for a shy little thing who kissed like a child, out of gratitude.

" Gimme a cigarette," said Freddo, coming to slowly. " I left mine in the train." He drew in smoke hungrily, and sat with the stunned look still on his face, not uttering a word.

" And you don't know her full name," said the sergeant, shaking his head helplessly, " and you're never going to see her again." He never was, but it didn't matter. " I simply don't understand you! "

" I don't suppose you do, chum," said Freddo loftily, watching his shining new vision of himself stalk forward into a future as void, and strange, and golden as the sky. " I don't suppose you ever will."

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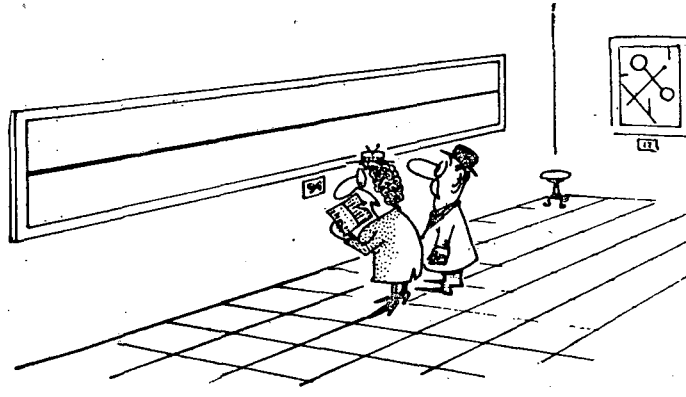

" All it says here is: ' Rubber-band, stretched ! ' "

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WOLF

A menacing, dark shape trailed them over the snow

BY P. F. LATHAM

WILSON watched the Eskimo approach but gave the man no chance to speak.

" Store's closed," he said harshly, " and we don't need extra help."

The Eskimo nodded, took a skin bag from the sledge and, opening it, brought out the wolf cub. It was about four weeks old, and it looked as lost and helpless as a puppy. Yet, as the camp commandant put out his hand to take it, the cub bit viciously, its mouth wide open, snarling weakly.

And, for some reason, Wilson adopted it from that moment; without questioning why the Eskimo had brought it to him in the first place, without even wondering why he'd reached out to take it.

When he did think about it afterwards, he knew that it was the cub's helplessness which had meant something to him. It was as if, in the cub, he saw why he was the man on the base who stayed on the job longest, and the only man who didn't want to fly south for his leaves. There was something akin to himself in the cub, cut off from its kind, intensely wary, and savage in its distrust.

He called it Wolf. Not that he was without imagination; but the name was brief, which he always was, and it was correct, which he always tried to be. At first, the other men joked with him about it, swearing that he was only rearing it to kill when full grown so that he could collect the government bounty. None of them even guessed what the cub really meant to their silent camp commandant.

That summer, despite the astonishment it aroused, Wilson took no leave. He was busy, he said, and besides he'd nowhere to go anyway. Back at Frobisher, where the men were flown out in Royal Canadian Air Force transports, the company's medical officer was worried: if Wilson cracked there would be the devil of a job finding a replacement. Or, at least, a replacement who'd stay till the work was completed, which wouldn't be for over a year. There weren't many men who could stand life in the

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northern bases very long. If they didn't take leave, they usually ended up crazy. When one of the geologists mentioned Wolf, however, the frown cleared and the M.O. merely looked puzzled. He thought of flying out, but didn't when he heard the weather reports. Wilson, he decided, was all right.

At the base, filled with new life as he saw the sun again after the long winter, Wilson began his training of Wolf. Right from the start it was a battle. The cub's teeth were still small but Wilson's hands were soon scarred by the bites. He even lost a piece out of his ear when, kneeling to pick up the overturned food dish, the cub sprang at him. But, without losing either his temper or his patience, the commandant persevered. All the time he could spare he spent with the cub, and though it often snarled at him, it allowed the man to handle it.

The night that Wilson woke to find Wolf snuggled into his sleeping-bag for warmth, he was filled with a sense of triumph; although Wolf nipped at him sleepily as he moved, Wilson knew that the cub was his.

From then on, the camp commandant and Wolf were never apart when work was finished. They ran together in the snow, the man throwing snowballs, sticks, anything to hand, and the wolf dodging easily, leaping forward in mock attack, looking so purposeful that newcomers invariably rushed for a rifle.

As the cub grew Wilson began to fear that someone might shoot it. At first he didn't know what to do, but eventually put up a big notice in the main mess hall that no wolves were to be shot within a three-mile radius of the camp. He expressed himself very forcibly when it was pointed out jokingly, that this was in direct contravention of the government policy on the killing of wolves. So forcibly, in fact, that no one else ever tried to joke about Wolf with the grim Scotsman after that; even though many men grumbled about the frights they'd had from looking over their shoulders at night to see a menacing, dark shape trailing them over the snow. Wilson was reasonable about anything else —the outbursts of bad temper, suspicion, dislike among the men who worked on the base—but about one thing he made it clear he was not going to be at all reasonable: Wolf.

Day by the day the cub grew and now, when it reared up to worry at Wilson, it almost touched the ceiling, like a large, bushy-tailed dog. Yet it wasn't a dog, as Wilson found out the morning he accidentally trod on the wolf's paw. It floored him and had its fangs at his throat before he really knew what had happened. Wilson was amazed at its instant reaction, yet not frightened, even though he could see the savagery in the wolf's eyes. He merely grunted, pushed Wolf away, and got up.

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" Ye're damned rough today," he said, and scratched it behind the ears.

It was on that day it occurred to him that Wolf was an animal of the wild, and that in making it so dependent, it would be at a grave disadvantage when it came to fend for itself. He knew that in about a year, work on the base would be finished; and he knew that when he did fly out, he couldn't take Wolf with him.

He went back to his hut at the end of the day, lost in the problem, and was met by a different Wolf. At first he thought that it wasn't the cub he'd reared at all, and froze as the blood-stained animal eyed him, tensed and dangerous. Then it leapt up at him and licked him eagerly, worrying at the cords of his parka as Wolf always did.

" So ye settled that one yourself," he commented wryly, and wondered what it was that Wolf had run down and killed.

In the morning Wilson found out.

Coming from breakfast, he heard the fight before he saw it. Behind his hut, half buried in the snow, was the body of one of the sledge dogs. Back to the hut, facing a snarling, yavering half circle of other huskies, was Wolf. Men armed with sticks had already come at a run, and a few carried rifles.

Wilson pushed through them, slapped at a dog that bit him, kicked others clear, and stood by Wolf.

" Put up those rifles, ye half-wits! " he snapped. " And get those dogs back where they belong."

" That was one of my best lead dogs," said Forrester angrily, pointing at the body of the husky in the snow. " That damned wolf ought to be shot."

" Haven't I told ye time and time again to keep the dogs chained at night?" demanded Wilson. " D'ye think I was talking for the sake of me health, man? Get those dogs back where they belong—and the rest of ye get to your work."

They paused, looking at Wolf whose fangs were still bared, and Wilson knew what they were thinking.

" I'll deal with him," he said, " don't ye worry about that. But I'll not need your help, so get back to your work now. Move! "

He stood until they had all withdrawn, and then he went into his hut. When he came out he was holding Wolf's chain and a strap. The wolf growled deeply as the man chained him—and tensed as Wilson forced its head down to the carcase of the dog.

Then, for the first and only time, Wilson beat Wolf.

Again and again he wielded the strap. The wolf's howls deepened from shrill anguish to hoarse savagery as it lunged

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forward, and Wilson knew that if the collar broke Wolf would kill him.

When he had finished, he threw down the strap and walked away. It was long after work had ended that he returned to his hut, and he swayed slightly as he walked. At his approach Wolf raised his muzzle from the snow, and there was menace in his eyes. Without pause, Wilson stumbled across, knelt, and slipped off the collar. The wolf's ears flattened, but the animal did not move.

Wilson went into his hut to finish the whisky, leaving the door ajar. All night he waited, and Wolf did not come.

For two days Wolf stayed away, and Randall, the deputy, was so worried about Wilson that he thought of getting a message back to Frobisher. Knowing his chief's anger, he delayed.

On the third night, as he went to his hut late after supper, Wilson saw the black shape slipping from snow mound to snow mound behind him. He felt almost weak with joy, but did not turn round or pause. Again that night he left the door of his hut ajar, despite the biting wind.

In the morning, there was a drift of fine snow melting on the floor of the hut, but Wilson was happy for, curled up at the foot of his bunk, was Wolf.

Time passed, and Wilson had moments of keen enjoyment as he romped with the wolf, went on long expeditions with it, at night relaxed with it by his stove. But with the passing of each day his fear of parting grew stronger. When he thought about it now he got drunk, and Wolf howled wildly outside the hut, refusing to come in while the sharp tang of whisky hung about the man. And then the animal would prowl with savage restlessness close to the dogs' kennels, so that all the camp knew from the noise that the commandant was drinking.

It was in the spring of the next year that Wolf, now over twelve months old, solved the question that nagged at his master. One brilliant, cold night he did not return.

Although this was not unusual, Wilson felt disturbed by it. The distant cry of a pack in hunt came to him just before he fell asleep, and vaguely he knew what would happen. All next day there was no sign of Wolf, and it was dark when Wilson heard the scratching outside his hut.

" So there ye are! " he said gruffly as he opened the door; and then he paused.

Seated in the snow, his tongue lolling out, was Wolf. Behind him, just beyond the circle of light from the hut, another wolf stood, watchful, intent.

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As Wilson stared, the strange wolf howled once and, quite silently, went back into the night. Safe in the darkness, some way from the camp, her howls came again. Wolf, looking at Wilson, hesitated before answering. As he did, Wilson smiled. There was an almost human plea in Wolf's cry.

" Go on, ye old devil," he said and, as the wolf still hesitated, " she'll not wait over long. Get off with ye! "

Wolf paused. Wilson thought of the contract expiring in under three weeks, of the flight back to the world he'd hidden from for so long. As the wild wolf called once more from the darkness, it was as if, somewhere, someone called him, too.

" Get away with ye! " he cried again, and shook his fist at Wolf.

Wilson stood for a long time in the doorway after Wolf had gone, listening to the cries of the pack as Wolf and his mate went to join them. He drank again that night when he was alone in his hut, but he did not drink as he had done before—desperately. He drank that night because he needed the warmth of the whisky. He drank calmly, thinking about the life he would go back to, as Wolf had done. And in a way he could not explain, he felt that he could face it.

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SOLUTIONS to TOP OF THE TREE on page 50

1. *Dr. Spooner.*
2. *Noel Gylby, in Michael Innes' " Lament for a Maker."*
3. *Fanny, in Nancy Mitford's " Pursuit of Love."*
4. *Eliza Cook,* 1818-89.
5. *The Cratchit family.*
6. *Christmas Rose.*
7. *Grey Owl's two beavers.*

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 144

Across. 1, *Hamster.* 2, *Pot-herb.* 9, *Scaffolding.* 11, *Milk.* 12, *Sail.* 13, *Ataturk.* 15, *Nodule.* 16, *Mellow.* 17, *Ada.* 19, *Enfold.* 20, *My page.* 22, *Day.* 25, *Orkney.* 27, *Prison.* 28, *Devilry.* 29, *Teem.* 31, *Pine.* 32, *Loblollyman.* 33, *Narrows.* 34, *Odorous.*

Down. 1, *Harmony.* 2, *Sick.* 3, *Effete.* 5, *Old arm.* 6, *Huns.* 7, *Bellows.* 8, *Bolted.* 9, *Sliding keel.* 10, *Galligaskin.* 13, *Allowed.* 14, *Keep dry.* 17, *Add.* 18, *Amy.* 21, *Postern.* 23, *Avidly.* 24, *Sneezes.* 26, *Yellow.* 27, *Prayed.* 30, *Moor.* 31, *Pair.*

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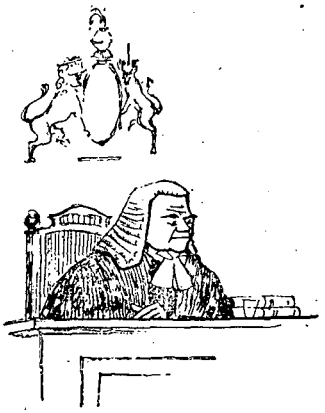

BLOOD ON THE SCALES

MICHAEL GILBERT

When Detective Sergeant Petrella discovers the murdered body of Rosa Bezley on the bank of Binford Park Reservoir, Superintendent Kellaway—a great man for results—is called in from the Yard.

Monk Bezley, Rosa's husband, had not been recaptured after his prison break, and when Monk's Camden Town gang, under Boot Howton, brutally injure Gover, the Divisional Officer, Kellaway takes over the Reservoir murder.

Petrella sees red when Kellaway, in his determination to present a clear-cut case for the conviction of Boot Howton, says nothing in his police-court evidence about the single fingerprint on the murderer's gun, and nothing about Ricketts, the intake attendant, who left his job and the reservoir cottage on the day of the murder. Kellaway also calls off the underwater search of the reservoir.

Petrella, outraged by Kellaway's arbitrary action, investigates on his own. He discovers that the single fingerprint on the gun isn't Howton's : it belongs to somebody named Bancroft. In flagrant disobedience of Kellaway's orders, Petrella turns frogman, continues the underwater search, and finds the decomposed body of a man.

As Chief Superintendent Barstow and Superintendent Haxtell learn Petrella's news, the trial of Boot Howton for the murder of Rosa Bezley is reaching its final stage at the Old Bailey—with Kellaway in court, as yet unaware of Petrella's discovery.

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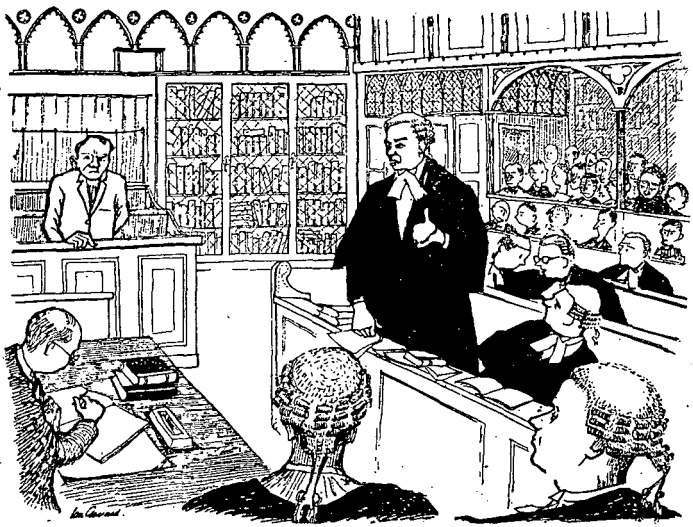

"I'M afraid," the man on the Law Courts telephone said courteously, "that no one can speak to Superintendent Kellaway just at this moment. He is in the witness box."

"In the witness box?"

"The Judge asked for him to be recalled. He had some questions to put to him before he commenced summing up."

"I see. Could a message be got to him, just as soon as he's out of the box, that Chief Superintendent Barstow and Superintendent Haxtell want to see him urgently? They are on their way down to the Court now."

"Chief Superintendent Barstow and Superintendent Haxtell. Very good, sir. I'll see if I can get a message to him as soon as he's free."

"I recalled you, Superintendent Kellaway," said Mr. Justice Rowan, "because I wanted you to assist me, and the jury, over one small point which has not emerged quite clearly from the evidence."

"I'll do what I can, my lord."

"I'm sure you will. It is this cottage. The reservoir cottage, it is called. As I understand the matter, in the ordinary way it would be occupied by Ricketts, the reservoir intake attendant. Did the police attach any particular significance to the coincidence that Ricketts should have walked out of his cottage on the day of—or possibly the day before—the killing of Mrs. Bezley?"

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"We thought about it a great deal, my lord. But we did not, in the end, conclude that there was any connection between the two events."

"There is no reason why the two should be connected," agreed the Judge. "I take it that efforts were made to get hold of Ricketts?"

"Certainly."

"And he has not come forward? Even though the case has now received considerable publicity."

"To the best of my knowledge, my lord, Ricketts has not come forward at all. Certainly he has made no effort to contact the police—"

"Thank you, Superintendent," said the Judge . . .

"They gave me your message just now, as I left the box," said Kellaway. "What's it all about? I gather, incidentally, that Sergeant Petrella has been putting in some more overtime."

He didn't say it angrily. There was a cool undertone of amusement in his voice.

"Yes," said Barstow. He, too, was being unusually restrained. The situation was pregnant with difficulty.

As he spoke, the door opened quietly and a uniformed attendant looked in. "The jury are back, gentlemen," he said.

"Guilty. His Lordship is pronouncing sentence of death on Howton now."

"That's that," said Kellaway. The way he said it, it sounded like a full stop at the end of the sentence. "Now what's this about Petrella? I gather he's found Ricketts. You've got to hand it to that boy. It doesn't make a lot of difference to the case, does it?"

"Well—" said Barstow.

"I always had it in mind that Ricketts might have got in the way of Howton that night and stopped the second bullet, and been dumped with the gun—"

"No doubt," said Barstow. "Only the body wasn't Ricketts. It was Monk Bezley."

"I've been forty years in the Metropolitan Police Force," said Barstow, "and I can't remember anything like it."

"It's a pretty good tangle," agreed Haxtell.

A week had gone by since a jury had found Howton guilty of capital murder and Mr. Justice Rowan had pronounced sentence of death on him, and a conference—unattended by Kellaway—was taking place in Haxtell's office at Crown Road.

"The story about us finding the second body got into the local papers. Somebody saw the ambulance driving away with it, and put two and two together. Naturally they all jumped to the conclusion that it was Ricketts who had been found. And we haven't taken any steps to undeceive them, yet."

"They weren't the only people who thought it was Ricketts," said Barstow.

"No, indeed."

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" I suppose there's no doubt about *that*."

" Of all the facts in this case, sir," said Haxtell, " that seems to be one of the few stone-cold certainties. The fingerprints alone, of course, were conclusive. Even without the prints there was quite enough secondary evidence for a normal identification. The medical and dental particulars from the prison records all tallied."

Barstow grunted. In his view, the whole case was a deplorable shambles, and a warning against inviting the interference of the central authority into district matters. However, there was a point of procedure which had to be cleared up. He said, " I've seen the Director of Public Prosecutions' office. They're supremely disinterested in Monk Bezley. They're assuming that Howton shot him, too. Which, of course, he may have done. And since Howton's been nicely convicted for the first killing, why should they lose any sleep over the second one? However, two can play at that game. If they want to stick to the book, I'm sticking to it, too. A dead man's been found in my manor. No one's been charged yet with his death. Therefore it's my job to carry out an investigation. Right? "

" Right," said Haxtell. There were rare moments when he found Barstow refreshing, and this was one of them.

" I'm putting you in charge. We won't assume that this case is anything to do with the other killing. In fact, we won't assume any damn thing at all."

" Splendid," said Haxtell. " I suppose, as it's an ordinary routine investigation, there's no reason I should use Sergeant Petrella on it."

" Ah," said Barstow. " Petrella."

There was an unhappy pause. Then he said, " It would certainly be sensible to use him. He knows more about the background than anyone else. The blasted young idiot."

" Did Kellaway insist on his pound of flesh? "

" He put in a report, yes. Direct refusal to obey orders. I've seen a copy. It's quite fair as far as it goes. There's bound to be a disciplinary board. They can't overlook it."

" When it comes to the point," said Haxtell grimly, " I should like to put in a report, too . . ."

As soon as Barstow had stumped off, Haxtell sent for Petrella. He gave him an edited version of what had occurred. " One thing's quite clear," he said. " We've got to find Ricketts. And so far there's only one place we know he isn't. That's in the reservoir."

This was quite true. The reservoir had now been officially searched from end to end, and side to side, and so thoroughly that a bent sixpence could hardly have escaped notice.

" We've got to set about this logically. First, let's assume that Ricketts had nothing to do with the killing and see where that gets us. It would mean that he had strong, but private, reasons for clearing out. And that it was a fluke that he happened to clear out that day. If that's right, then it was Howton who took the boat out, and dumped Monk Bezley and the gun."

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"Having weighted Bezley down with three pieces of marble fender which we now find came from the cottage."

"Yes. But we know Howton was in the cottage, anyway. The prints on the window show that."

"We don't know why he was in the cottage."

"Well—presumably it was his base of operations."

"If he was working from the cottage, why didn't he bring the boat back and put it quietly away where he found it?"

"There are plenty of loose ends," agreed Haxtell. "But let's go on with it and see where it takes us. If Ricketts had nothing to do with it, where is he now? From all accounts he was an independent, solitary sort of man. No family ties. Went where he liked, did what he liked."

Petrella thought about it. Then he said, "It sounds all right, but I don't believe a word of it."

"I'm not sure I believe it myself. What's the alternative?"

"The alternative," said Petrella, "is that Ricketts shot both Rosa Bezley and Monk."

"Yes. And why?"

"I haven't any idea," said Petrella. "Anyway, he leaves Rosa where she is, being fairly happy that she won't be found. And dumps Monk in the deepest part of the reservoir, along with the gun he used for the killings."

"Which was a souvenir he'd had from his Army days. That's why it was so thick in grease."

"Right. And," concluded Petrella triumphantly, "he couldn't go back to the cottage and the landing stage, because by that time Howton and the boys were in possession." They looked at each other.

"It's got possibilities," agreed Haxtell. "We still want a lot of answers. If it's right, then the fingerprint on the gun *must* be Ricketts'. It couldn't be anyone else's. Only from Army records, it appears to belong to a character called Bancroft, who got into trouble, once and once only, when on leave from the Army in the First World War."

"Ricketts was just old enough to be in that war. Lundgren, the Resident Supply Engineer, said so. He said Ricketts lied about his age to get in. That would make him—what? Seventeen in the last year of that war. And in his late fifties now."

"Which ties up all right with our man."

"So all we've got to do is to prove that Bancroft is Ricketts and we're home and dry."

"We've got to do a lot more than that," said Haxtell. "We've got to show some connection between Bancroft/Ricketts and Howton and the Bezleys." He thought for a moment. "This seems to split itself up into two jobs, doesn't it? Suppose I get Mote on to the Bancroft end. He can start down at the Fingerprint Section. Get what details they can give him there, and work his way forward. You tackle the Ricketts side. See Lundgren again. He'll know the name of Ricketts' Army pals. Work through them.

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Don't waste any time. You've got a deadline of eight days."

Petrella stared at him.

Haxtell said, "Howton's case comes up before the Court of Criminal Appeal tomorrow week. I've just heard. It's been expedited ... ."

Petrella found Lundgren in an unco-operative mood. "I wish I'd never let you into my reservoir," Lundgren said. "It's been nothing but trouble."

"This is nothing to do with the reservoir," said Petrella. "It's a bit of ancient history. I want to find out everything I can about Ricketts personally."

"I'm surprised he hasn't been in touch with you. I should have thought he would have been bound to have read it all in the papers."

"That's what we thought, too."

"And yet, I don't know that I am so surprised. Ricketts was an odd sort of chap. Superficially, very friendly, but I doubt if he had any real friends. He was older than the ordinary run of chaps in the Battery. When he went out, he usually went alone."

"A self-contained sort of person," suggested Petrella.

"That's right."

"Do you think he might have had some sort of past?"

Lundgren reflected. "It's easy to imagine things like that, after the event," he said. "But now that you put it to me, I shouldn't be entirely surprised. I don't necessarily mean anything criminal: one just got the impression he was a bit of a man of mystery."

"Was he married?"

"I think he drew a marriage allowance. Although that's not always the same thing. I'd have said he was the sort of man who was quite attractive to a certain sort of woman. You know how they go for the quiet, grey-haired, fatherly type."

"Yes," said Petrella. He found a very different picture building up in his mind from the rough Water Board labourer he had started by visualising.

"Army records should be able to give you some information about that. I'm sorry I haven't been able to help you more."

"On the contrary," said Petrella.

The War Office were helpful. They turned up Ricketts' paybook and identity documents.

Petrella ran his eye down the page. There was something there that might be useful. *Next of Kin: Wife. Dorothy Mabel Ricketts, Forge Cottage, Bearsted, Kent.*

"That would only be a wartime address, I expect," said the officer in charge of records.

"Never mind," said Petrella, "it's a start."

He took the afternoon train from Victoria to Maidstone, and a local train brought him to the pleasant Kentish village of Bearsted, which huddles round a green where cricket is still played.

The woman who opened the door to him was, he guessed, about fifty; thick set, grey-haired, and unsmiling.

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Petrella introduced himself. " It's a long time ago," he said apologetically. " Someone who may have been evacuated here during the war. A Mrs. Ricketts."

" You'd better come in," she said, and called out, " Mother."

An old lady in black appeared from an inner room. " It's a gentleman from the police, mother. He's asking for Mrs. Ricketts." They both stared at him, and Petrella felt uncomfortable under this convergent gaze. " If you have any information . . ." he said.

" I'm Mrs. Ricketts," said the grey-haired woman. " I'll tell you anything I can, but if it's my husband you're looking for, I warn you, it won't be much, for I haven't set eyes on him for more than twenty years."

" Another dead end," said Petrella. " She was as helpful as she could be, but it didn't amount to much. They got married in 1924, when she was eighteen. They never had any children. He was away from home a lot, and pretty soon she began to think he'd set up a second home of his own somewhere."

Haxtell looked up sharply, and Petrella said, " Yes. That's the type that seems to be emerging. It makes you wonder, doesn't it? By the time war broke out in 1939, she hadn't seen Stanley—that's his name, apparently—for two or three years. He'd been sending her a little money from time to time. She was back with her mum. When he joined the Army he put her down as his wife and next of kin, and the marriage allowance went to her. He had to do that. She'd have gone up to the War Office and raised hell if he hadn't. She knew her rights."

" And when the war was over—? "

" As soon as he was out of the Army, the money stopped."

" Didn't she do anything about that? He was still her husband."

" I asked her that," said Petrella. " And she said, ' I'd got a job and I didn't need the money. But to tell you the truth I was glad to see him go. He wasn't really a good man.' "

" She might have been right, at that," said Haxtell. " Where do we look next? Time's getting short."

It was on his way home that night that Petrella saw the card in the window—a signal from Rosa's friend, Jean Fraser. He had given up visiting Collins' shop, having drawn blank there so often. But since he had to go past it, he stopped to look. " The person," said the card, " who was asking about a job at the reservoir. Inquire within."

The little shop was lit by one economical bulb, and smelt like the inside of a biscuit tin.

" The party that left this card," said the man behind the counter, " was most particular that her message should only be given to a—dang it, but I've gone and forgotten it—a foreign name."

" Petrella."

" Right. A Detective Sergeant Petrella."

Petrella produced his warrant card, which the man examined.

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"That looks all right," he said. "You're to go to Flat 5, No. 74, Parsons Road—off Westbourne Grove. You know it?"

"I can find it. When do I go?"

"Any evening this week between six and seven, the lady said. She'd be there, if you wanted to talk to her. Come to think of it, that was Monday, and it's Thursday now, and nearly ten to seven, so it looks as if you'll have to wait till tomorrow."

Next morning there was an unexpected message for Petrella—from Carver, Harrowing, and Livermore of Lincoln's Inn.

"Solicitors," said Gwilliam, who had taken the message. "An old aunt's died, I wooden be surprised, and left you a packet."

"The only old aunt I've got's ten years younger than I am," said Petrella, and dialled the number he had been given.

He was put through to Mr. Harrowing, who introduced himself.

"I saw you in the Magistrates Court," he said. "I don't think you were at the Old Bailey, were you? We're instructed on behalf of the prisoner."

"Oh yes," said Petrella cautiously.

"We wondered if you could come down and have a word with us. Or we'll come up and see you, if that's more convenient. There's a certain amount of urgency. The Appeal in this matter comes on next Thursday."

"Well," said Petrella, "I'll have to find out if it's all right."

"I don't see why your bosses should make any difficulty about it," said Mr. Harrowing. "After all, presumably we're both interested in the same thing, and that's to get at the truth."

"All the same, I think I'd better check up. I'll ring you back."

"I can't say I like the idea," said Superintendent Haxtell, when it was put to him, "but if you're going at all you'd better go willingly. They could subpoena you if they really wanted to."

"But why me? All they can know about me is that I gave evidence on fairly unimportant points in the Police Court."

"And didn't give evidence at the Old Bailey."

"Yes. He mentioned that. You don't suppose—"

"I don't know," said Haxtell. "The thing to do is to go and find out what they're after. You needn't commit yourself. You can always pass the buck by saying that you have to refer to higher authority."

"What I really don't want is for anyone to think that I've been running off on my own bat, proffering information to the Defence. I wouldn't—"

"No," said Haxtell, looking at him curiously. "No. That's all right. I don't think anyone thinks that. And by the way, I didn't tell you. Mote found Bancroft."

"He *what*?"

"I don't mean he found him in person. I mean he traced his 1914–18 record, or what was still left of it. Here's a copy."

He pushed a typewritten flimsy across the table and Petrella read:

Robert Lowry Bancroft, enlisted Jan. 1918. *Age at enlistment* 18.

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Passed fit for General Service. France, May 1918. *Posted, 9th Royal South London Regiment. Acting Lance-corporal, July* 1918. *Rank confirmed, August* 1918. *Mentioned in Dispatches, August* 1918. (*London Gazette, September* 8, 1918.) *Next of Kin, Sister, Eileen Joyce Harman,* 14, *Countess Road, Upminster, Essex.*

" It's a good record for a youngster," said Petrella. " They put them into the thick of it pretty young in those days."

" By the spring of 1918 the Army were glad to take anyone with two arms and two legs. The point is, is it Ricketts? "

" It easily could be," said Petrella slowly. " It fits most of the essential points. Ricketts was in his late fifties, and was known to have a good First War record. The only thing is that I'm pretty certain Lundgren said he had the M.M. Wouldn't that be in his papers? I mean, wouldn't it be in Bancroft's papers if Bancroft later changed his name to Ricketts? "

" It ought to be. But if Ricketts was a crook, he could easily have put up a medal ribbon he wasn't entitled to. But we're getting somewhere now. If this next-of-kin sister was already married, she must have been a few years older than Robert. So a search among the Bancrofts at Somerset House may turn her up."

" Suppose we do find Bancroft and he isn't Ricketts? "

" I refuse to think about it," said Haxtell. " You get on down to Lincoln's Inn and remember that all lawyers are the natural enemies of the police."

" Well now, Sergeant Petrella," said Mr. Harrowing. " I asked you to come down and have a chat because I understand that you were not entirely satisfied with the police case."

Mr. Harrowing had served for several years during the war in the Royal Navy, and was aware of the value of the attack direct.

Petrella blinked a couple of times, and said, " Oh, I think that's an exaggeration. Who told you that? "

" I'm going to be quite frank with you," said Mr. Harrowing, who apparently liked what he saw of Petrella. " In fact, I'm going to start by throwing away my best card. I have no intention of calling you to give evidence under subpoena. Indeed, how can I? I have no idea what you would be likely to say, and until I know that, I have no idea whether you wouldn't do my client's case more harm than good."

" I see," said Petrella. " It hadn't occurred to me—I'm no lawyer, of course—but I didn't imagine that any further question of giving evidence arose."

" In the ordinary way, it wouldn't. In nineteen cases out of twenty the Court of Criminal Appeal considers the record and listens to what Counsel has got to say."

" And doubles the sentence."

" Well, that's the popular idea. However, there are rare cases in which the Court will listen to fresh evidence. Evidence which has come to light since the trial." Mr. Harrowing leaned back in his chair. " I think this might be one of them."

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Petrella said nothing.

Mr. Harrowing said, " I wonder if the man in the street realises quite how difficult it really is to defend a person who is charged with murder. I don't mean that the police are unfair. It's just that they have a monopoly. There's only the one investigating machine, and they're running it."

Petrella felt himself going red. He said, " They are bound to answer any questions the Defence asks them."

" Quite so," said Mr. Harrowing gently. " But how are they to know *what* questions to ask? " He paused, and added, " In books it is of course quite simple. I believe that private detectives of great ability abound."

Petrella said uncomfortably, " I do know exactly what you mean. You'll understand that I'm not a very senior member of the police force, and I couldn't give you any help without permission."

" Of course. I understand that."

" I can tell you that investigations are still going on. They haven't reached any sort of conclusion, and strictly speaking they are not investigations of your case at all. But obviously, if anything does come of them, it's going to be to your advantage."

Mr. Harrowing nodded.

" And it's just occurred to me that there's a way you can help. I shall probably get into trouble for even suggesting it, but could you arrange for an advertisement—it's the sort of thing solicitors always seem to be doing, so it wouldn't necessarily arouse any suspicion—one of those things that says that if Mr. A will get in touch with a certain firm of solicitors, he will hear something to his advantage? "

" I can do that," said Mr. Harrowing, making a note. " Who's your Mr. A? "

" He's a Robert Lowry Bancroft." Petrella spelt it out and Mr. Harrowing wrote it down carefully. " He was last heard of in 1918 when he was serving in the 9th Royal South London Regiment, in which he attained the rank of Lance-corporal and was mentioned in dispatches."

" I suppose you can't tell me what it's all about."

" Not at the moment. But if you should happen to find him, it will be the best day's work you've done for your client yet."

When Petrella got back to Crown Road he found an official letter waiting for him. It was impressed with the stamp of the Commissioner's Office, and it said that Detective Sergeant Petrella was to call at New Scotland Yard on the Monday following, at four in the afternoon, in case he wished to exercise the right open to him under Regulation 3 of Police Discipline Regulations of making an explanation personally to the Chief Officer of Police of the matters alleged in the Misconduct Form of which particulars had already been supplied to him.

Petrella took this straight in to Haxtell, who said, " Damn. I thought there was a chance that we had succeeded in killing this. Evidently I was wrong. What are you going to do about it? "

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" I'm certainly not going to put anything in writing," said Petrella. " What's likely to happen? "

" It's a sort of preliminary skirmish. They want to hear what you've got to say—"

" So that if they don't like it, they can give me the whole works later."

" That's right. My own feeling is that if you apologised to Kellaway and promised not to try to fight the war on your own in future, they'd let you off with a caution."

" Nothing doing," said Petrella. " In fact, I may have added another large blot to my copy-book this morning." He told Haxtell of the suggestion he had made to Mr. Harrowing.

" It's not a bad idea," said Haxtell. " In fact, it's a good one. There's something about an advertisement from a firm of solicitors, saying if you get in touch with them you'll hear something to your advantage. All the same, if Bancroft's Ricketts, and if Ricketts is the sort of man I picture him as, I don't see him coming forward."

" *He* won't. But what about his relations, or old Army friends? "

" I said it was a good idea," said Haxtell, " and I meant it. But I think you should have told me what you meant to do, and let us fix it through one of our own contacts."

" If I'd stopped to think about it," said Petrella, " I expect I would have, but it doesn't make a great deal of difference. Not to me, personally. As soon as this case is finished I'm getting out."

Haxtell looked for ten whole seconds at the furious young man opposite him, and said at last, " I think I should wait and see, first, what they do want to say to you down at Headquarters."

" You know exactly what they'll say. Some stuffy old Chief Superintendent, who's lived with one finger in the Rule Book ever since he worked his way up off a beat, is going to point out that I have infringed sixteen different rules and regulations by daring to think for myself, and—"

" All right," said Haxtell placidly. " Don't take it out on me. And don't let's chuck the hand in before it's finished. I'm as keen as you are to know what really happened up at that reservoir. Let's find that out first, and worry about your future afterwards."

When Petrella had taken himself off, Haxtell got up, kicked the waste-paper basket with beautiful accuracy up on to the mantelpiece, and said, " Damnation take the silly young idiot."

That evening, at six o'clock, Petrella was ringing the bell of Flat 5, 74, Parsons Road.

The white-faced girl opened the door. " Jean's in there," she said. It was the tiniest flat he had ever seen. Really, it was one small room, most of which was taken up by a bed.

" This won't take long," said Jean. " I'm sorry about all this secrecy. But I daren't be seen talking to you."

" I'm sorry my reputation's as bad as that," said Petrella.

She took no notice of it. She was past the point where conversational gambits were picked up and tossed back again.

" You remember when you came to see me before the trial and

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asked me a question about Rosa? Whether she'd ever met Ricketts?" Petrella said he remembered.

"Well, it was a pretty good guess. She'd been going with him for months. He was her boy friend."

"He was *what*?"

"What I said. Stanley Ricketts. He was all her idea of what a man should be. Grey hair, good manners, plenty of money. Of course, he was a phoney. Most of the money was hers anyway. But she couldn't see that, not at first. I'm not sure you can blame her. She'd only got people like her husband and Boot to compare him with. He must have seemed quite something after that pair."

"Are you telling me that they were sleeping together?"

"That's right. When she went out at nights, that's where she went. And another thing, he was looking after her 'stocking' for her. All the stuff she was meant to be keeping an eye on for Monk."

"Of course," said Petrella. "Of course. Under the floorboard in the kitchen. Don't mind me. Please go on."

"That's all there is, really. When I heard she'd been shot, I thought he might have done it. She'd been getting the idea that he'd been fiddling her over the jewellery. Selling it on his own account. If Monk got out, there'd have to be a showdown, wouldn't there?"

"Yes," said Petrella. Curtain after curtain was being ripped down, layer after layer of obscurity dispersed. "Yes, of course there would. Why on earth didn't you tell me this before?"

"Why?" she said. "Because I was scared, of course."

"Scared of who?"

"Of Howton, first of all. He'd been smelling round my place ever since you found the body. Then—"

"Yes," said Petrella. "But after we'd charged him, you couldn't have done him anything but good by speaking."

"I didn't owe him anything. Besides—"

"Go on."

"I didn't want to talk against Ricketts. Rosa was more scared of him than she was of Boot. And she didn't scare easily."

Petrella said nothing. She could feel the anger and contempt in him, and she said, "Why should I take any chances? I didn't want any part of either of them. I was sorry for Rosa, but she wasn't part of my life. You don't understand. How can you?" Her voice went up. "What it is, to be a woman, without much money, in London, on her own. Particularly when you get mixed up with those sort of people. Boot had a key to my flat. Rosa gave him one. And if I'd asked the landlord to change the lock, I'd have had to tell him why. And I'd have been out of the flat at the end of the month. You don't understand. People like Boot and Bezley don't have to use a razor on a girl. They make a little row where she lives and she's out in the street, or come along and kick up a fuss at work, and she's out of a job. What's the use of police protection then?"

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" If that's right," said Petrella, as if he hated it, but had to say it, " why are you willing to tell me this now? "

" None of it matters now," she said. " Boot's booked, isn't he? And Ricketts is dead."

In the sudden silence, she looked up sharply.

" *Isn't he*? " she said.

" Do you think she was telling the truth? " Haxtell asked Petrella next morning.

" Why, yes," said Petrella. In fact, he had not even thought about it. " Why should she lie? "

" Jean Fraser might have been put up to it by Howton's friends. As a last desperate move to get him off. Sow a bit of doubt."

" I don't think they would have had the wit to think it up, and I don't think she would have done it, if they had."

" All right," said Haxtell. " You're more likely to know if she's telling the truth than I am. You've seen her. I haven't. Let's start from there. Ricketts was Mrs. Bezley's lover, and she was carrying his child."

" He was more than a lover," said Petrella. " He was a safe deposit as well. He was hiding the jewellery for her which her husband had stolen and had entrusted to her before he went to prison. He had made a cache for it in the kitchen."

He told Haxtell about that.

" And you spotted this cache under the floor of the cottage when you were dressing up on one of your—er—night-diving operations."

" I ran my finger into the butt end of the screw in the floor-board," said Petrella. " There's the scar. I didn't connect it with anything in particular at the time."

" All right," said Haxtell. " Let's try to sort it out a bit. Start on Saturday afternoon."

" I think," said Petrella, " that Rosa didn't go straight from her flat to the reservoir. According to Mrs. Fraser she was out of the house by three o'clock, but I don't think she got to the reservoir much before dusk."

" Because she'd have been seen climbing in."

" Yes, and because it was their routine. She'd go in much the same way we did, across the far corner of the recreation ground, through the broken gate, to a rendezvous among the bushes."

" You think they'd met there before? "

" Oh, I think so, yes. That was where he made love to her. One of the places."

" We know she didn't go absolutely straight to the reservoir."

" How's that, sir? "

" She must have stopped somewhere to buy an evening paper. That edition she was carrying is on the streets in the West End at three o'clock, but it doesn't get to these parts before four."

" Right. And she'd taken out the middle page, with the piece about her husband on it, ready to show to Ricketts. And pushed

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the rest of the paper away out of sight. Which was a lucky break for us. I think she was in a very dangerous frame of mind. Frightened, and angry. Angry with Ricketts, because he'd got her into trouble. Now that her husband was loose, it really was trouble. And angry because she'd begun to suspect that he'd been short-changing her about the jewellery."

"Selling it on his own account?"

"Yes. The only jewellery sales which are definitely tied up with Howton took place *after* the murder."

"And were quite small pieces. The idea being that he— All right, don't let's jump the gun. Go on. She's lying among the bushes, in a bad frame of mind, waiting for Ricketts to appear."

"Which he does. I think she stopped for something else, too. I think, but this is guessing, that she met her husband. They arranged it on the telephone the night before. I should think he wanted to see her a lot more than she wanted to see him."

"You mean, she was afraid he might have heard about her and Ricketts?"

"I don't honestly think that he would have cared very much if he had. It wouldn't have made him any fonder of Ricketts, I agree, but there was only one thing on his mind at the moment, and that was ready money. The money that she was supposed to have from the sale of the jewellery he had left with her, and which, as she had begun to realise lately, she was seeing very little of. Because Ricketts was hanging on to most of it."

"Do you suppose she told her husband about that?"

"I don't think she had any option. The one thing she couldn't explain away was that she ought to have had a lot of ready money—which he desperately needed—and she couldn't produce."

"It's conjecture," said Haxtell. "But I think it's reasonable. So what did they plan to do?"

"What would you have done, sir?"

"Gone and shaken Ricketts down."

"And that was what they were going to do, too. She would go to her usual rendezvous with him, at dusk. That would give Monk a chance to get into the cottage. For that's where the remains of the jewellery and the ready money were. If Ricketts had a hoard, it was in the cottage. Once he had been drawn away from the cottage, Monk was on to a good thing to nothing. Either he found what he was looking for. Or if he didn't, he waited till Ricketts came back. There'd have been ways of making him talk."

"Yes. And what went wrong?"

"What must have gone wrong," said Petrella, "*is that Ricketts bought himself an evening paper, too.*"

There was a long silence, while Haxtell turned it all over in his mind. At the end of it, he let his breath out slowly like a man who has come up from deep water, and said, "It's an idea. That would be why he took a loaded gun with him to his rendezvous. A war souvenir that he kept, all greased up, and loaded, and tucked away under another floorboard. Do you know, I'm beginning to

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get the impression that Mr. Ricketts isn't a very nice character."

"His first wife was afraid of him," said Petrella. "And he impressed himself so powerfully on Jean Fraser that she wasn't prepared to say a word until she thought he was dead."

"I like this story," said Haxtell. "Go on, Patrick."

"I don't know whether Rosa lost her temper with him, or whether he deliberately provoked her, but there certainly came a moment in their talk when she pulled out the page of the paper, and pushed it in his face, and said, 'You're not dealing with a helpless woman now. My husband's out, and he's in the cottage waiting for you, so you'd better come clean, or else—' "

"So he shot her."

"Yes. Quietly, there and then, and shovelled a lot of leaves on her, and let her lie."

"And then went back to the cottage and dealt with Monk, too."

"I think so. It was either that or give up the money. He'd killed once. He'd nothing to lose by killing again. I should think he had everything pretty well packed up for a getaway. An escape route mapped out. A hideout arranged."

"Yes. And it's clear why he dumped the second body in the reservoir. It would be a lot less messy, and leave less trace than dragging it up into the bushes. And if he was going to dump the body, it was sensible to dump the gun as well. What I can't see is why, having dumped them, he didn't come back, tie up the boat, and walk quietly out of the front—oh yes, I can, though. The rest of the boys had turned up."

"That must be the answer, sir. There he is, sitting quietly, resting on his oars, in the middle of the reservoir, when he hears something—sees a light in the cottage, perhaps. He can't go back, so he goes on. He'd know all about that back way out. He'd probably reconnoitred it earlier on, with the idea of a getaway."

"And Howton? How much did he know or guess?"

"He certainly didn't know about Rosa and Ricketts. If he'd known about it, it would have been one of the first things he'd have told his lawyer. My guess would be that Monk had simply told Howton he was going to the reservoir to meet his wife."

"Or he was seen—or followed. And Howton arrived too late, but in nice time to carry the can for everything. He'd ransack the cottage, no doubt. And he found what was left of the jewellery—the odds and bits that hadn't been worth selling before. And being a greedy bastard, he couldn't resist selling them himself. Thus wedging his ugly head firmly into a noose."

"It's a nice build-up," said Haxtell. "Very creditable. How did you think of it all?"

"It came to me in bits and pieces," Petrella said.

"I'm not sure I don't like it better than the official version, really," said Haxtell.

"Of course you do," said Petrella indignantly. "This is the truth."

"They're both theories. There's just one thing will clinch

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yours and destroy the opposition. Find Ricketts and fingerprint him. If it's his print on the gun—there's no argument."

"That's not going to be all that easy," said Petrella. "Even if Central showed more signs of co-operating, which they don't."

Haxtell felt unable to pursue that one. But he knew quite well that a nation-wide search with the drive of Scotland Yard behind it was a great deal more likely to be successful than any efforts they could organise themselves.

He said, "The more I think about Ricketts the more certain I am that he's that rare sort of criminal, a man who looks ahead. I believe we shall find that he had his hideout all ready. It'd be a lot easier for him if he had someone to help him. He'd visit from time to time, and he'd be known, under another name of course. Then all he'd have to do would be to walk away from the reservoir, put on a pair of hornrimmed glasses or a deaf-aid or a toupee, or make some other slight adjustment in his appearance—just enough to cover himself if we decide to publish a photograph and sink comfortably into his new background. That's the clever way to run away. Sit still."

The two men stared out of the window. It had begun to rain in the cold, vertical manner peculiar to England in late February.

"He's careful, all right," said Petrella. "Almost brilliantly so. That telegram he sent was a real beauty. It worked both ways. If no suspicions were aroused, then it was just Ricketts saying good-bye to his employers. If people ever did get suspicious, then it could be something very different. The man who had disposed of Ricketts, covering up his tracks."

"That theory wasn't going to survive the dragging of the reservoir."

"Why not?" said Petrella. "Nothing might have come to light until the Water Board made their next two-yearly tidying up of the shrubbery. I know that our fingerprint people are good—but heavens, after a year under water who was going to say that the drowned man wasn't Ricketts?"

"It's no good sitting here telling each other what a damned clever chap he is," said Haxtell. "What we've got to do is to get busy and find him. And we've got—what's today?—Saturday."

"And the Appeal's on Thursday."

"Then we've got five days to do it in."

"One thing," said Petrella, "that I am prepared to bet my bottom dollar on. If we're right about the sort of man Ricketts is, the very last thing he's likely to do is answer our advertisement."

The telephone rang. Haxtell picked it up, listened for a moment, and said, "What? Yes, he's with me. He can take the call from here." And to Petrella, "It's your lawyer pal."

Petrella picked up the telephone, and Haxtell unashamedly picked up the extension receiver.

"Harrowing here," said the voice thinly. "I thought I'd ring you, in case you missed it. We managed to get that advertisement in the papers this morning. Did you see it?"

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"That's good work," said Petrella. "And you'll get in touch with us if you hear anything?"

Mr. Harrowing sounded faintly surprised. "That's why I'm ringing you," he said. "I have heard something. A Mr. Bancroft telephoned me just now. He's fairly certain from the details in the advertisement that he must be the man it refers to."

"Did he—did he give an address?"

"Oh yes. An address in Hammersmith. I checked it. It's in the telephone directory. We might have thought of that, perhaps."

Petrella scribbled down the address and telephone number, and said to Mr. Harrowing, "Don't you worry. You've done very well. We'll look after this now."

When the solicitor had rung off, they sat for a moment staring at each other. "Let it be a warning to you," said Haxtell at last, "never to bet on certainties."

Riverside Fields, Hammersmith, which looks out across a strip of muddy foreshore at the ever-moving Thames, is a Hogarthian tumble of houses, some of them very big, some tiny. No. 50 was one of the tiny ones, no more than a four-roomed cottage. It was beautifully kept, its brass gleaming, its paint fresh. The woman who opened the door to him was Mrs. Bancroft herself.

He felt little doubt that the small, wiry person who greeted him from a chair by the fire was Mr. Bancroft. There was not an ounce of deception about either of them. No place in their lives, you would have said, was hidden from the light of day.

"It's about the advertisement," Petrella explained.

"Quick work," said Mr. Bancroft approvingly. "I only phoned after breakfast. What price the law's delays?"

"They can move when they have to," said Petrella. He added, "I'd better introduce myself. I'm a Detective Sergeant. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

Mrs. Bancroft looked as if she might mind, but her husband said, "Ask anything you like. Why not? It's a free country. You get us a cup of tea, Minnie." Mrs. Bancroft recognised that she was being dismissed and went reluctantly.

"Women talk too much," said Mr. Bancroft. "Not but that she'll have it all out of me as soon as you've gone. Now then, what's it about?"

"First of all," said Petrella, "are you—or were you—Lance-corporal Robert Lowry Bancroft of the 9th Royal South London Regiment who fought in France during most of 1918 and was mentioned in Dispatches?"

"That's me," said Bancroft.

Petrella took carefully from his pocket a postcard-sized photograph of Howton. He handled it carefully, because the back of the photograph had been specially treated with a substance which, while impossible to detect by feel, was particularly receptive of fingerprints. He held it out to Bancroft, who grasped it trustingly.

"What am I supposed to do?" said Bancroft. "Say snap?"

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" I was wondering if you happened to recognise the man."

" Can't say I do. Ugly looking customer, ent he? Reminds me a little of the Regimental Sergeant Major in the old South Londons. But o' course *he*'d be dead a long time now." He transferred the photo thoughtfully to his other hand, to get a better light on it.

" Well, it was just a chance," said Petrella. He took the photograph gently back, put it into an envelope, and dropped the envelope into his pocket. " Here's another question for you. I don't want to rake up the past more than I must, but did you get into a spot of trouble during your war service? "

" Trouble? C.M.P.s—that sort of thing? " said Mr. Bancroft.

" It might have started with the Military Police, but it ended up with a charge in a Police Court. It sounds the sort of thing that might have happened while you were home on leave."

Mr. Bancroft shook his head.

" It's a long time ago, I know," said Petrella.

" I wouldn't forget a thing like that," said Mr. Bancroft. " All us boys had trouble with the Military Police from time to time. But nothing that wasn't settled in the Orderly Room the next morning—and forgotten about a week later. I didn't have no trouble with the police. You look at my record sometime. Honourable discharge. Character exemplary."

" I'm sure you're right," said Petrella, getting up. " There's been a muddle somewhere. I'm sorry you've been troubled."

" No trouble. That bit about ' something to my advantage.' That was just put in to get an answer."

" Yes, it was, really. I'm terribly sorry—"

Mr. Bancroft burst out laughing.

" I'm not the sort that has long-lost uncles turn up from Australia," he said. " I only had one uncle, come to that, and he was a lighterman and fell into the Thames at Chiswick and got drowned. I suppose you couldn't tell me what it's all about."

Petrella felt tempted. Mr. Bancroft, who might well have turned nasty, had been so unexpectedly nice that he felt that some sort of reward was due. Discretion prevailed.

" I can tell you this," he said. " It's a case of murder. Double murder. We thought you might be able to help us—I'm quite clear now that it was a mistake—but if you had been the person we thought you were, it might have been very useful. And I'll come down here myself and tell you all about it, as soon as we've got hold of the man who did it."

Mr. Bancroft said unexpectedly, " You mean, that if I'd been able to tell you—something about that thing you were talking about—the case of assault—it might have been useful."

" Very useful," said Petrella.

" Then why don't you? " said Mrs. Bancroft from the kitchen.

They both stared at her.

" It's forty years buried now. It can't harm you. If it can help, why not tell it? " Mr. Bancroft looked at his wife, opened his mouth, and shut it again.

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" It's not a very creditable story," he said, and a silence fell.

Petrella sat down very gently, so as not to disturb Mr. Bancroft's thoughts.

" It was in 1918. I had my birthday in January. I was just eighteen. I was due for the call-up some time that spring, but I didn't wait for it. I went along. The first place I went to was an intake centre at the old Crystal Palace. Then we moved down to Sussex. It was fun at first, waiting to go across. Then it wasn't so much fun. It was the wounded that unsettled us. The men who had been wounded before, going back again. One of those blew his foot off, in camp, the night before he was due for draft. That sort of thing isn't good for a young boy. It makes him edgy.

" There was another young chap, enlisted the same day as I did. Name of Ricketts."

" Yes," said Petrella softly. " Yes. Go on, please."

" He was about the same age and height and shape as me. Same red cheeks and dark hair. I don't mean we're twins, but people who didn't know us sometimes mistook us. He was full of spirits. The whole thing was an adventure to him. Then, a day or two before we moved to our Embarkation Camp, we had a final check—and they found he'd got something wrong with his ticker. No active service for Ricketts. No fighting, no fun. Clerical duties at the base. It broke him up. Can you guess the rest? "

" You did a swop."

" That's right. Names, clothes, kit, everything. Only one thing we kept. On the form we had to fill in before we sailed, we each put our own next of kin. Just in case anything happened."

" So he put down his—sister, wasn't it? And you put down your—? "

" My aunt. What happened next was funny. Ricketts got sent straight out to the South Londons—a front-line crowd. That was in early March. I got my base job all right. Then we had the March push, when the Jerries nearly got to Amiens. By the time it was held, they were pretty hard up for men. So they had a re-check of all the medical categories."

" And found nothing wrong with you, and assumed the doctor at home had made a mistake."

" That's right, and buzzed me straight up to the front, too. And the funny thing was," concluded Mr. Bancroft, " that I believe I made a better soldier than Stan Ricketts after all. He got a ' Mention ' for me. But I got an M.M. for him."

The story seemed to be at an end.

" What happened then? " said Petrella.

" When we were demobbed we swopped back again."

" The thing I didn't like," said Mrs. Bancroft judicially, " was him having your medal. It wasn't right. Particularly now it seems he left you a police record into the bargain. We didn't know about *that*."

" But—" said Petrella. Then the absurdity of the whole situation struck him and he dissolved in laughter. Mr. and Mrs.

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Bancroft laughed with him, but more doubtfully. " Do you mean," said Petrella, " that no one ever knew? What about your families? I suppose you had to write a few letters."

" Field Service Postcards. And all you had to say was you'd hurt your hand and got a pal to write it for you. Anyway, my old aunt, who was the only relative I had, she died in the April. Shock, they said, on account of a Zeppelin. She ought to have seen the old blitz, eh? "

" Did Ricketts' sister ever write back to you? "

" Once or twice. A lot of home gossip. I can't remember what. Only she was always pestering me for match-boxes."

" Match-boxes? "

" She collected 'em. Match-box tops. I used to send her French ones, when I could get hold of them."

" And you've never seen Ricketts since? "

" That's right. And I don't suppose I'd recognise him if I did. Nor him me. I used to be a bit nervous, at first, someone would turn the whole story up, and I'd get into trouble. But the years went by and it got buried, and I don't suppose anyone would worry a lot about it now, if they did know, would they? "

" I'm certain they wouldn't," said Petrella.

" Has it been any help to you? " said Mrs. Bancroft.

" Well," said Petrella, " it's told us where not to look, and that's always a help . . ."

" So all the time we were checking up on Ricketts' Army record, it was really Bancroft's? " said Haxtell.

" That's right, sir."

" And everything we found out about Bancroft belonged to Ricketts? "

" Except the next of kin. They were genuine."

" And Bancroft—I mean Ricketts—no, I don't, I mean Bancroft won the M.M. that Ricketts wore in the Second World War? "

" Yes. It was a very safe fraud from Ricketts' point of view."

" I think that makes it worse," said Haxtell. " What the hell are we going to do now? "

" Our best chance is the sister. If she's still alive."

" You think she might know where he is? "

" It's an odd sort of character who's emerging," said Petrella. " I've been thinking about him a good deal, lately."

" Let's have it."

" This last little bit sort of sets the pattern, don't you think? He tried on this change of identities with Bancroft—and it worked. It didn't do him much good, *but it came off*. No one found out about it. Well, I think he's been doing things like that ever since. Living a piece of his life in one place, then cutting completely adrift, and moving off somewhere else."

" Living on women? "

" Oh yes. I should think so. And if that's right, he'd need a firm base to manœuvre from."

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" And that might be his sister."

" Yes. He would be her brother who ' lived abroad,' and came home on long visits every now and then. It would be perfectly natural for him to turn up at any time with a suitcase, and re-occupy the spare room that was always kept for him."

" And all we know about his sister is that she was called Mrs. Harman in 1918. She may have changed her name six times since then. There's no law against it."

" We know she collected match-boxes," said Petrella.

That was Saturday evening . . .

When he got to the station on Monday morning, Cobley said, " You've a visitor. We put her in the Interview Room."

" What's it about? "

" No idea, Sergeant. It's a woman. The Superintendent isn't here yet, so I told her you'd see her when you came in."

A small woman rose from the chair in the Interview Room to greet him. Petrella thought she might be in her early thirties. She had a pretty face, spoilt only by a hardness of the mouth and the two vertical lines between the eyes which can be engraved by worry or pain. Her blue eyes were shrewd.

" Can we help you? " said Petrella.

" I don't know if I can help you, or you can help me," said the woman. " I'm Mrs. Ricketts."

" Mrs. Ricketts? "

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"That's right. Stanley Ricketts' wife."

"When—?"

"In 1946. In the Marylebone Registry Office."

It suddenly occurred to him that he didn't know what to say. She saved him the trouble.

"You're going to tell me he's married already," she said. "Is that right?"

"Yes," said Petrella. "If we're talking about the same man."

She fished in her handbag and pulled out a photograph. It was a snapshot, taken on the beach. It showed a man, lying back on the sand on his elbows, laughing; a good figure of a man, despite advancing middle age; a nice, easy, indeterminate face.

"I've never seen Ricketts, or a photograph of him," said Petrella. "But I can soon show this to someone who has."

"He was funny about photographs," said the woman. "He'd never have one taken. If there was anyone about with a camera he'd keep out of their way. When he found out I'd taken this one, he got hold of the negative and the print and tore them up. I never told him I'd kept a spare print. As a matter of fact, that was what first made me wonder about him. That and the fact that he was so mysterious about his family."

"You never met any of them?"

"Met them? I never even heard him speak about them. I asked him once or twice, but I soon gave up. Wait a minute, though. When I say never, I'm wrong. Once—it was soon after our marriage—we passed a little girl in the street wearing one of those iron things round her leg and a great heavy boot. I said something about it. He said, 'My sister's been like that since she was a baby, and she's had a very happy life.'"

"You gathered she was still alive?"

Petrella's eagerness had betrayed him. She stopped, and looked at him. "Suppose you tell me something first," she said. "You can guess why I'm here. I read that piece in the papers, about him being found drowned. Was it true?"

For a moment he hesitated. Then a look from her sharp eyes decided him. "No," he said. "That was just the newspapers. It wasn't Ricketts, it was—someone else."

"So he's done the disappearing trick again."

"Yes," said Petrella. "He's done it again." How many times before, how many times since? "When did he walk out on you?"

"In 1949. As soon as we'd spent all my money."

"I see."

"And he didn't walk out on me. I walked out on him."

He looked at her.

"You probably won't believe this bit," she said. "It was early in 1949. We had a flat at Romford, and he was travelling for Barshalls, the sweet people. But it's no good asking them about him, because I tried that later, and they didn't know a damned thing. I was saying—it was one evening, when we were going to bed. We'd had a quarrel. We didn't quarrel a lot. He was an

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easy man to live with. But we'd had a quarrel that night about my money. And it went on in the bedroom. I was sitting on a stool, in front of the dressing-table, doing my hair. And I said something about it was no good him thinking he could spend all my money, and then walk out on me. He married me, and I was his wife, and that was something that lasted for life.

"And he said, quite quietly, 'Yes, of course.' It wasn't what he said, it was just that I happened to look in the glass at that moment, and caught the expression on his face. It was—it was quite cold. Like a reptile. I've never seen a look like it before, on a human face, and I never want to again. The next day I packed up my things and walked out on him."

"You're wanted down at the Yard," said Superintendent Haxtell. "As soon as possible. You can take a car."

"Are you sure that's right? I was due down there at four o'clock for a—whatever it is is going to happen about Kellaway's complaint."

"I don't know about that. All I know is that the Assistant Commissioner has expressed a desire to have a word with you."

Petrella gaped at him.

"I'm not pulling your leg. You'd better get a move on. Romer's a bad man to keep waiting . . ."

"I understand," said the Assistant Commissioner, his long, hatchet face expressionless, "that there have been developments in

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the Binford Reservoir case since the hearing at the Central Criminal Court. I'm told that you have been the officer most actively engaged, and it seemed to me that the best way of bringing myself up to date was to have a word with you. If we're going to change our minds about Howton, we haven't a lot of time to do it in."

Petrella made what he hoped was going to be a non-committal noise. It sounded so terrible that he swallowed it, half uttered.

"What I'd like you to do is to tell me exactly what you think did take place. You needn't waste time over the background. I've read the file."

So Petrella told him. Once he had got started, it was not difficult. He had told it to himself so often that it came tripping out like a favourite story, almost too word-perfect for complete conviction. At the end of it, Romer said, "So your view is that Howton was there that night, but that he turned up too late to do anything but collect some oddments of jewellery—and to put himself on the spot by selling them later."

"Yes, sir. The people who gave evidence of sales by Howton all spoke of the last two months. The pieces involved were quite small. Robins, the pawnbroker, only gave a hundred pounds for six. Even at the usual rate of discount, that's not big stuff."

"Your idea is that Ricketts had already sold anything that was worth while. And that if we took the witnesses who had failed to identify Howton, and confronted them with Ricketts, they would identify him."

"I think so; yes, sir."

"And that the print on the gun will turn out to be Ricketts'. Wrongly filed here, incidentally, as belonging to Bancroft."

"Yes, sir."

"And that the people who identified the gun as being Howton's weren't entirely reliable witnesses."

Petrella could easily have gone wrong there. But the last few months had taught him a lot of lessons. He said, "It was a very common type of gun, sir. It would be quite easy to be mistaken about a thing like that."

"Yes," said Romer. "It would. The Crown, on the other hand, maintains that Howton did arrive in time. That he shot both Bezley and his wife, and disposed of the bodies. The facts which have now come to light about Ricketts living with Mrs. Bezley—and living on her—afford an explanation, which was missing before, of why he ran away when it came to the pinch. They don't necessarily make him a murderer."

"No, sir."

"In fact, they are two theories. And there's only one way of discovering which is right. We've got to find Ricketts." He unfolded his long body and took it across to the bow window which looked down on Westminster pier and the pleasure boats.

"And you have a photograph, and you think he may be living with his sister, who has a deformity of the leg."

"And collected match-boxes, according to Bancroft."

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" Well, we've got home with less than that before now. We'll see what we can do. Thank you."

As Petrella turned to go, Romer added, " I nearly forgot. There's been a disciplinary complaint made against you over your conduct in this case." He picked up a thin, Oxford-blue folder from his desk. " I have read the papers. I have an overriding discretion in all such matters. And I have decided that although you acted in disobedience of orders, those orders were not, themselves, very sensible. I have given instructions for the record to be destroyed."

Petrella could think of nothing to say.

" Don't imagine, however, that I condone direct disobedience. It's a thing you can get away with only once in your professional career. Always supposing you intend to continue in your career. Superintendent Haxtell said something about your resigning."

" No, sir," said Petrella. " That was a mistake."

" I'm glad about that," said Romer. " And another good bit of news for you. Gover sat up last night and started taking nourishment."

Petrella went on his way. Outside Scotland Yard, between the western entrance and the Cenotaph, there stands a public house where generations of policemen have slaked their thirst. Petrella found Sergeant Dodds propping up the Saloon Bar.

" What cheer, Patrick," said Dodds. " Wattle it be? "

" Oh, half a pint," said Petrella cautiously.

" Pint of bitter for my friend," said Dodds. " I've got some news for you."

" You've decided to turn over a new leaf."

" I've turned over so many of those," said Dodds, " that I've pretty nearly finished the book. No—it's old Kellaway, our Chris. He's handed in his cards."

" Chris? "

" Who else? Said he couldn't afford to stay on a minute longer. His publishers are roaring to go, and he's getting a personality spot on T.V. It's all fixed. Well, I ask you! Bungho."

" Bungho," said Petrella.

" His first book's out in the autumn. *Murder, Mayhem, and Mirth* it's called. I get two mentions in it. ' My old friend Albert Dodds agreed with me '—page ninety-two; and ' Sergeant Dodds expressed a contrary view '—page a hundred and four."

" I believe you're making the whole thing up."

" Cross my heart, I'm not. It'll be in the *Gazette* tomorrow." Sergeant Dodds picked up three darts from the counter and flung one of them idly into the dartboard.

" One case I don't mind betting he leaves out though, that's the Binford Reservoir case. Between you and me, it wasn't really one of our best."

Tuesday was a difficult day. Even Haxtell had little idea of what was happening and, being a wise man, turned himself grimly to routine . . .

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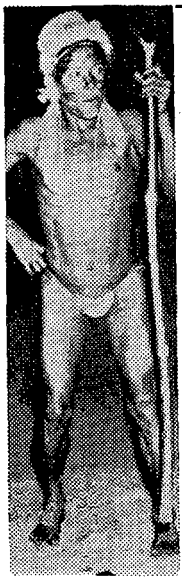

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To all Stations of the Metropolitan Police Force and to all Chief Constables of Borough and County Forces: Most Urgent. It is desired to trace a lady, at one time passing under the name of Eileen Joyce Harman. Thought to be between fifty-five and sixty-five years of age and to be suffering from a deformity of one leg necessitating the wearing of a surgical boot.

Petrella slipped over to Hounds Green and had a word with Lundgren. "What I wanted to do," said Petrella, "was to have a look at the things Ricketts left behind. I remember you told me you'd got them."

"They're in the basement here. You can look at them now if you like. There's not a lot. He didn't leave a stitch of clothing. You'll find everything he did leave in that big packing-case. And there's really nothing that you could call a personal belonging. Just sheets and pillow cases, and two sets of curtains and some crockery and cooking stuff. Most of it bought from local shops, I imagine. Another odd thing. The man who cleared up for us commented on it. He didn't find a single scrap of paper. Even the waste-paper basket had been emptied."

"It was too much to expect that he'd make any obvious mistakes. I did have a faint hope that as his actual departure was so quick he might have forgotten something—"

"I seem to remember that he was a bit of a handyman. He had a plane and a good set of chisels."

Petrella was soon on his knees in front of a packing-case. Slowly he dipped into it, slowly drew forth a pink vase, ornamented with tiny green oyster-shells; shells which formed the words, *A Present from Whitstable*. "By God," he said at last. "It's a chance . . ."

By twelve o'clock the next morning the chance had grown into a bare possibility.

Chief Superintendent Denmark, the chief officer of the Whitstable and Herne Bay Constabulary, had started with considerable scepticism. "Millions of souvenirs like that sold every year," he said. "All it means is that this man knew somebody who had once spent a holiday at Whitstable. Isn't that right?"

"It's only a chance, of course," said Petrella.

"Or he may have spent a holiday here himself. Of course, we'll do what we can. I saw the teletype. Wasn't much real information there, was there now?"

"It was all we had," said Petrella humbly. He was in no position to command. The successful working out of his hunch depended entirely on the co-operation of this fiery little man, with the ginger-coloured moustache adhering like a blob of bitter marmalade to his aggressive upper lip.

"What did occur to me," said Petrella, "—I expect you'd had very much the same idea—was that we might get at it through the doctors. People who have a deformity like that have to have a regular check-up. It isn't the foot itself. It's the hip—"

"Yes. That wouldn't be too difficult. We could get a list from the doctors."

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It turned out to be quite a long list. Fortunately a number of candidates could be disposed of at once. Either they were the wrong age, or the wrong sex, or disqualifying circumstances arose.

"Can't be Mrs. Toomey," said Denmark. "She's related to my mother. A most respectable old lady." Mrs. Toomey was struck off.

By the early afternoon there were three real possibilities left. All of them were ladies past middle age, about whose background little was known. And all of them had at least one gentleman of approximately the same age recently come to stay with them, in the capacity of family, lodger, or paying guest.

"Well, there you are," said Denmark. "Short of calling on them, I don't know how you're going to pick the winner. What's he done, by the way? I ought to have asked you that before."

"The known charges," said Petrella, "are double murder and bigamy. There might be further charges of larceny to follow."

"I shouldn't worry about any further charges myself," said Denmark. "If you're going visiting, you'd better have one of my men with you."

"If we do find him, sir, we shall have to go gently. He's a very clever man, very alert, and ready to disappear at the drop of a hat. I think, if you don't mind, I'd like to make a little reconnaissance first. I promise I won't move without letting you know."

The next two hours were busy, and at the end of them he had dismissed Mrs. Cartland from his calculations. On the other hand, as between Mrs. Williams and Mrs. Duhamel there was still very little to choose. Both were of the right age, both wore undeniable surgical boots, and both had been joined "about two months ago" by a gentleman a little younger than themselves.

It was at the general stores where he was pursuing his inquiries in the character of a prospective lodger, that a genuine inspiration visited him. "I wonder," he said, "if that would be the Mrs. Duhamel I knew in Yarmouth. It's not a common name, is it?"

The assistant agreed that it wasn't a common name. He imagined it might be French.

"One thing I do remember about her. If it's the same woman, that is. She had a fine collection of match-boxes."

The assistant shook his head. He had never heard anything like that about Mrs. Duhamel. He added, as Petrella turned away disappointed, "Of course, if it had been Mrs. Williams now—"

"Does Mrs. Williams collect?"

"*Does* Mrs. Williams collect?" said the assistant. "There's scarcely a day goes by but she's in here bothering us for a new sort. Of course, we're very sorry for her with her infirmity, poor lady, but sometimes when we're rushed with customers—" But Petrella was out of the shop. At the eleventh hour, after all rational chances had failed, after all the favourites had tumbled, a real, genuine, hundred-to-one outsider had come romping home.

"It certainly sounds hopeful," said Denmark. "Now let's do a bit of thinking. Bay View—that's the line of small houses actually

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on the front. No. 36 would be pretty nearly the end one. There's an open stretch of sand-dunes at one side. We'll have to guard that. And a sort of Pleasure Park—it's shut just now—at the back. Two men there. And one man along the sea wall on the other side. We needn't worry about the front. He won't swim. Not in this weather."

Petrella was glad to see that the Superintendent was taking the job seriously. He had a feeling about Ricketts which was beginning to border dangerously on the superstitious: that he was no ordinary man, but a creature with curious instincts of his own, attuned to danger and sensitive to threats.

"Do you think he's carrying a gun?"

"I don't know, sir. He could be. He's used one before."

"I think we'll keep quiet about that. Don't want to make my people nervous. Now then—as soon as we're all in position, we'll walk up the front steps and knock at the door. You've got that photograph. Think you can identify him?"

"Oh yes," said Petrella. "I'm sure about that."

He couldn't have said why he was so sure.

It was five o'clock by this time. The wind, which had been blowing great guns all day, had blown the clouds out of the sky, and a pale sun was now looking down on a wrinkled grey sea.

As Petrella and the Superintendent approached No. 36, the front door, which stood at the head of a little flight of steps, opened gently and Ricketts came out. He was wearing a soft cap of old-fashioned cut, a muffler, twisted twice round his neck, with the ends tucked well down inside his coat, and he was carrying a stick. Petrella had not the slightest doubt who it was. He had made no sign to the Superintendent, but the Superintendent knew, too. The two men walked on past the house. Out of the tail of his eye Petrella saw Ricketts come down the front steps, and turn towards the town.

As soon as they were out of sight they turned, too. Three of the men they had posted were visible. The Superintendent waved them after him, and hoped they would understand.

Pausing now and then to take deep breaths of sea air, and once to purchase a packet of cigarettes, Ricketts made his way eastward with the concentration of a man following a known routine.

"Farther he gets from home the better," said the Superintendent. "We'll take him when he turns."

But Ricketts did not turn. He walked steadily forward, keeping the sea on his left. Ahead lay the old harbour. Beyond that, the wastes of Tankerton. When he reached the harbour, Ricketts swung left, out on to the short, stone pier, and stood for an instant at the far end of it, outlined against the sky, now lemon-yellow under the setting sun, then turned back.

The two men barred his way.

"Excuse me," said the Superintendent, "but is your name Ricketts?"

The man had stopped, a yard from them. He made no attempt

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to answer. He was looking to right and left, weighing chances, calculating risks. They might have had the world to themselves.

"Look out," yelled the Superintendent, and threw himself forward, as Petrella ducked down, and the next moment rose, shamefacedly, from his knees. For what the man had produced from his pocket was an ordinary cherry-wood pipe, which he proceeded calmly to fill.

"What's the big idea?" he said. "Weaving about like that. Yes. My name's Ricketts. Who the devil are you?"

Petrella sat, alone, in the crypt bar of the Royal Courts of Justice. It was eleven o'clock in the morning and he was drinking a cup of milky coffee.

Somewhere above his head, in that rambling wedding cake of a building, in the Court of the Lord Chief Justice of England, the Lord Chief himself, assisted by Mr. Justice Penworthy and Mr. Justice Meiklejohn, was considering the case of the Queen against Howton.

The Reservoir case, in its early stages, had failed to grip the public imagination. The victim was a woman, but not a young or a glamorous woman. And the prisoner was a professional criminal; and seemed to be quite plainly guilty.

Now, no one quite knew how, at the last minute of the eleventh hour, the word had got through to Fleet Street that the Reservoir case was news; news on the largest possible scale.

There had been an independent investigation—no one quite knew by whom. New facts had come to life. The reputation of the police was involved.

Nothing was possible in the morning papers beyond a few guarded preliminary references. But by half past nine there was a queue for the public gallery, and when the three Judges took their seats on the stroke of ten o'clock the Court was crowded.

The Lord Chief Justice of England, Lord Melford of Drome, a short but unforgettably impressive figure, faced Boot Howton across the well of the highest Court of Criminal Jurisdiction in the land.

"I understand, Mr. Younger," said the Lord Chief, "that in view of certain evidence now in its possession, the Crown has decided not to proceed with the case against this man."

"That is so, my lord," said Mr. Younger.

"Very well, then, Mr. Younger. It only remains—"

"Might I say a word, my lord?"

"Certainly, Mr. Wainwright. I take it you are not going to press the Crown to reconsider its decision?"

"I should only like it to be made plain, my lord—I understand this to be the case—that this decision has not been reached on any legal technicality, but because the Crown is now quite convinced that my client had nothing to do with the crime with which he stood charged."

The Lord Chief looked at Mr. Younger, who rose again, and

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said, "That is so, my lord. I would add that proceedings are pending against another accused."

"In that case," said the Lord Chief, "it remains only for me to discharge you. Which I do."

The next moment the dock was empty.

Petrella had just put down his cup, and was wondering how he was going to kill the hours until lunch-time, when a few feet away from him a small, lancet-shaped door, with intricate ironwork hinges, opened and Boot Howton came out. He was quite alone, and looked a bit lost.

The two men stared at each other speechlessly.

A court official appeared behind Boot, and said to him, "If you want to avoid the crowd, you can slip out into Carey Street."

"That's all right," said Howton. He stood, still staring at Petrella, and Petrella, fascinated, stared back.

A faint sneer ridged Howton's unlovely face. "So you couldn't make it stick," he muttered. Then he hitched himself round, and stumped off up the tiled passage and through the swing doors at the end of it, and out of sight.

Petrella sat on for a long time. He was tucked away at the end of the long bar, and no one took any notice of him.

When fresh activity round the bar signalled that the luncheon recess was approaching he got up stiffly and walked out into the main hall of the Courts.

On an impulse, he turned left halfway down the hall, climbed a flight of turret stairs, and found himself immediately outside the Lord Chief Justice's Court.

He pushed open the door and peered inside. The Court was empty, and silent, but it had the signs of its recent use all about it; the heavy chairs on the dais pushed back, just as their judicial occupants had quitted them; the clerks' table below the dais littered with papers; and books everywhere, some lying singly, some strapped in bundles, and many thousands more cramming the shelves which walled the Court. Petrella thought that he had never seen a room more impressive or more apt to its purposes; panelled and cool, a quiet harmony of law-calf and boxwood set against green curtains and walls.

Immediately over the Lord Chief's seat, Petrella observed that the Lion and the Unicorn carved in hard wood faced each other across the Crown. The Unicorn was gazing up into the ceiling. The Lion, on the other hand, was staring down his nose at the Court. He had a sardonic look about him.

He had been watching over Justice for so long.

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★ ***The first part of The Achilles Affair, by Berkely Mather, appears in next month's Argosy on sale January 9***

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ARGOSY CROSS-WORD

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Solution on Page 107

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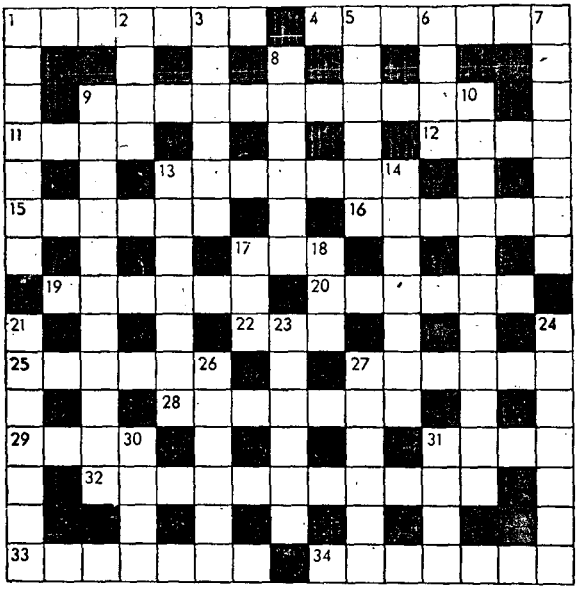

CLUES

Across

1 Theatrical gammon in this rodent (7).

4 Bag a bouquet-garni ? (3-4).

9 Site of block, not tackle (11).

11 Better drunk mild than old (4).

12 Jib, maybe (4).

13 Attaboy, Kemal ! (7).

15 Salute Christmas in the lump, almost (6).

16 " Season of mists and —— fruitfulness " (Keats) (6).

17 Palindromic girl (3).

19 That'll wrap it up (6).

20 " Mark my footsteps, good——" (Good King W.) (2, 4).

22 When cheap, a ticket (3).

25 Isle N.E. of York by arrangement (6).

27 Initially altered, gaol's a prayer (6).

28 Evil indeed (7).

29 Get together backwards (4).

31 Evergreen languish (4).

32 Surgeon's mate tosses money around (11).

33 Shafts in straits (7).

34 Sour Odo ? No, fragrant (7).

Down

1 Musical if muddled morn in hay (7).

2 Result of too much plum pudding ? (4).

3 Feeble expeditionary force at gala (6).

5 " Seven years From these — —s and legs " (Shakespeare) (3,4).

6 Nogood nomads (4).

7 Roars to keep the Yule Log burning (7).

8 Both horse and stable door (6).

9 Centre-board (7, 4).

10 Half medieval breeches (11).

13 May owe all (7).

14 Order relating to powder (4, 3).

17 A Doctor of Divinity plus (3).

18 A Little Woman (3).

21 Mail put in back door (7).

23 Greedily, idly after bible (6).

24 Spread diseases (7).

26 Novel hue of aster (6).

27 Besought like a mantis (6).

30 Tie up and fell (4).

31 What 10 isn't (4).

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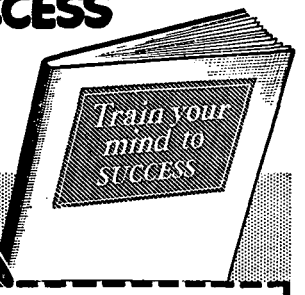

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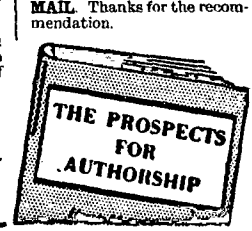

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